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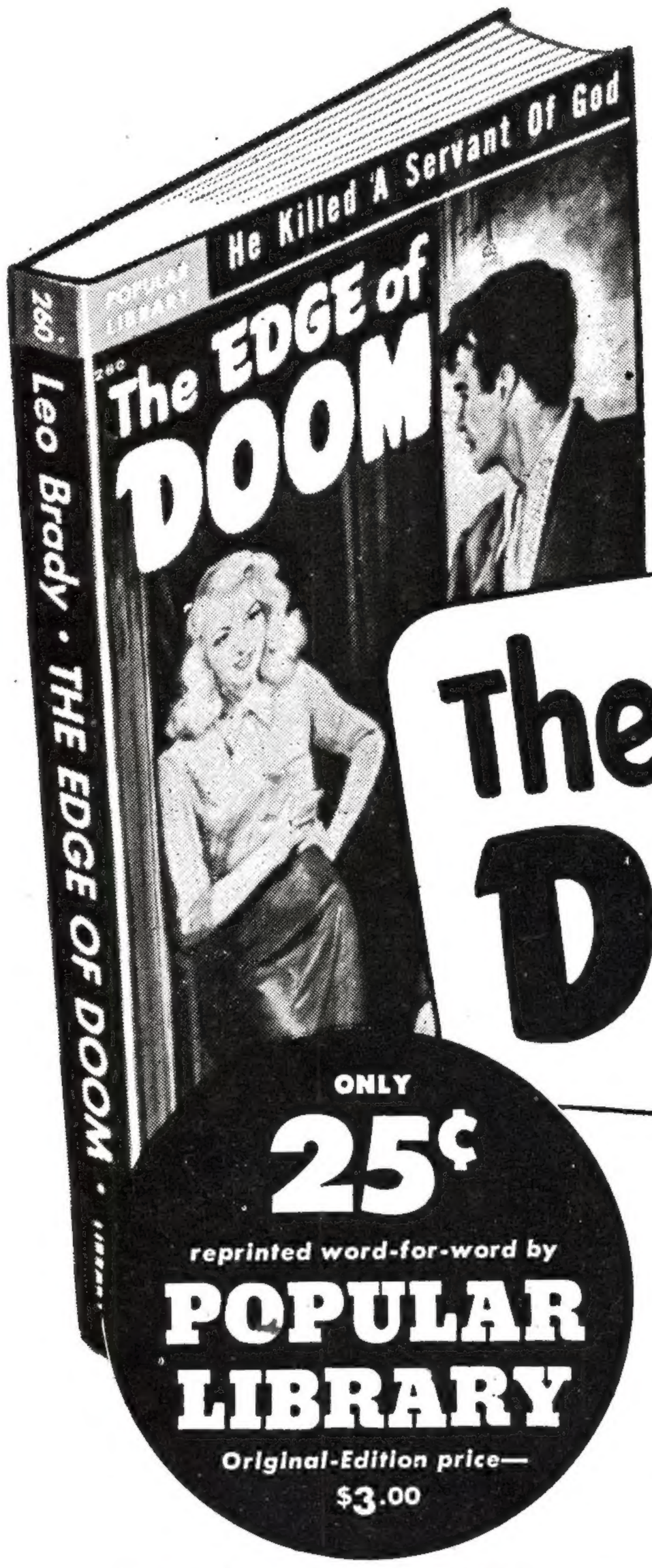
By CLIFF FARRELL

GUNSMOKE GIRL
By BRADFORD SCOTT

TRAILS OF STEEL
By A. LESLIE

CHEROKEE VALLEY CLEANUP
By L. P. HOLMES

TROUBLE TRAIL
By LEE BOND



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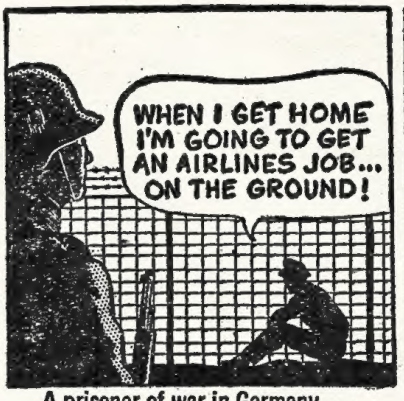

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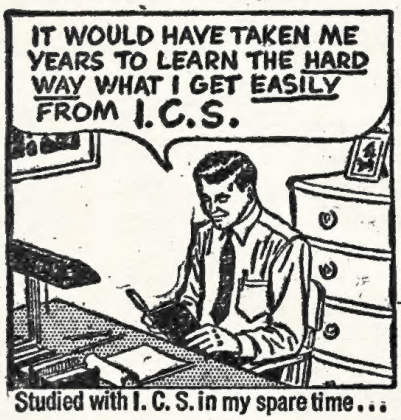

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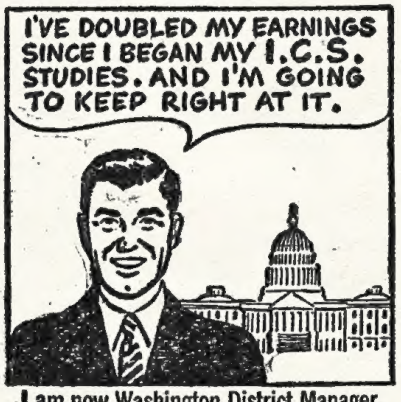

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CHEROKEE VALLEY CLEANUP

Following a stuttering train robber's tracks, Lake Cordell hits an outlaw realm where fear and peril ride menacingly!

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GUNS OF ROMANCE

The trail to Angel Valley led through Paradise Pass—but Ring Wilson had to cross the Devil's Griddle on his journey!

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GUNSMOKE GIRL

Fast-shooting ranny Tom Farnol faces battle against heavy odds when he gun-backs the cause of beautiful Rita Devers!

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TRAILS OF STEEL

Colt-wise Walt Harvey wages his own private war to defeat the sabotaging foes who oppose the coming of the railroad!

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A Department for Western Fans Conducted by JOHN A. THOMPSON

LET'S not dodge the issue, outdoor-minded guys and gals. Whatever your trip there is a certain amount of work involved in camping out. This should be expected. After all you are living on your own in Nature's wilderness — temporarily at least. You're not stopping at the Ritz.

On the other hand there is no need in the world to make drudgery out of camp chores that can't be ducked. They are part of the game. And there is a definite glow of satisfaction, a real enjoyment in outdoor camping tasks well done.

Tent living is an art. Common sense and an attention to detail that is instinctive with experienced campers are the things that can provide any outdoor lover with a real home in the woods.

The Hard Way

Slovenly camps, tents sloppily set up at poorly chosen locations, campfires that smokescreen the campsite or burn the breakfast bacon to a black cinder are telltale signs of campers who are missing much of the pleasure of outdoor life. They are doing it the hard way.

Poor planning and lack of system too can double the work of making and breaking camp. Not that we would suggest having an efficiency expert along on what is or should be, essentially a pleasure trip. That's cutting it too fine. But there is a happy medium. Some sort of program is called for that divides the work more or less evenly among the campers in the party and gets things done in an orderly sequence—first things first.

Trifles Spell Comfort

There are, by the same token, a lot of seeming trifles that added together spell camping comfort. Overlooked they can make outdoor living a pain in the neck, or at best a test of how much misery a guy can stand.

For one thing forget the too often stated rule that camp should be made two hours before dark. Start two hours *before sunset*—which is a vastly different thing. If you don't know beforehand the spot you are going to stop, four hours before sunset is not too soon to begin looking for a suitable campsite.

The important point is to make camp early enough to have your tent erected, beds made, campfire built, fuel supply laid in, supper cooked and the dishes done before night closes in on you with a bang. With all due respect to flashlights and camp lanterns, stumbling around doing the supper dishes after dark is no fun. It may be necessary in case of emergency but don't make it part of the regular camp program. Save those early after dark hours for rest, lounging around the warmth and comfort of a campfire blaze—and maybe a little songfest if there is a barber shop quartet in the bunch.

Camp Fire Singing

You would be surprised at the guys and gals who would never think of singing anywhere except in the bathtub or under a shower who will open up and give with the vocal cords when they are gathered by the flickering light of a wilderness campfire. Good voices too some of them have, once they let their hair and their inhibitions down.

Another highly important consideration is to choose your campsite with care. Wood and water should be available. If you have pack animals along grass for grazing must not be forgotten.

Just where you rein in your horses, beach your canoe, stop your car, or call a halt to your hike depends of course to a certain extent on the type of camping trip you are on. It may be a pre-determined camp area in a National Forest or a State or National Park. In which case you don't have to worry. But a lot of times it isn't. And that's where a little foresight is worth a lot of hindsight.

If your self-chosen stopping place happens to be—as it most generally does—along rivers, fishing streams or lake shores don't let a handy cove, or stretch of clean, sandy beach lure you too strongly. Tent pegs won't hold in soft sand. And twilight is likely to bring out mosquitoes and other insect pests in droves.

Instead look for a small, partially timbered, grass-covered promontory, or a low bluff standing several feet above the actual water level. Then you will have a tent site that is well aired in summertime at a spot where you will catch an evening breeze, if there is one—and ground that will hold your tent pegs in any weather.

Don't Camp Under Tall Trees

Above all don't camp in a hollow where surface water can collect, or under the tallest tree or trees you can find. Aside from being natural magnets for lightning, tall trees drip rain and dew on your tent. Don't camp either under old trees with rotting branches that could be broken off in a strong wind and fall on your camp—possibly with disastrous results. Even without serious results a heavy, falling limb can scare the daylights out of you and play hob with your camp setup.

Pitch your tent, if possible, where it will catch a few hours of morning sun—and be in the shade in the afternoon. Since into each life some rain must fall—even a camper's—be prepared for it. Once your tent is up take the time necessary to dig a four or five-inch deep drainage ditch around it. It may not be needed. If it is, it is better to have the thing already dug than to have to pile out at night in a sudden shower and do the job.

Another rainwise tip. Should it look showery when you turn in, or if you are camped in a location where early morning hours are habitually damp, stack a few sticks of dry kindling wood inside the tent before you go to bed. You, or whoever is elected for the

(Turn page)

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chore of getting the breakfast campfire started will bless them in the morning.

That Elusive Ideal Spot

Naturally it is not always possible to find the ideal camping spot, perfect in every respect. This is particularly true in making short, one-night stands in unfamiliar country. The solution is to pick a spot with as many of the desirable features as you can —and as few of the undesirable ones.

Among the latter are dense bottom lands which are usually damp, clammy and often foggy in the mornings. They are also apt to be flood traps in case of a heavy rain. Nor are high-walled ravines and deep, narrow gulches good camping sites. Not enough sunlight, and the site you pick may be dangerous in case of sudden high water.

Camp sanitation is important. Burnable garbage should be burned, the rest buried in a fairly deep hole and covered with a layer of dirt after each addition. Tin cans should be flattened and buried. There is sense to these fundamentals of tidiness. A littered camp draws flies and insects. Food scraps left beside the fireplace attract field mice and other rodents, and these in turn are apt to lure snakes into camp.

Once your campsite has been chosen, unpacking your gear is the first job. Have some system about it and pile the various bundles where they won't be in your way while you work.

Next, if it is a canoe or pack trip you are on, give your transportation what attention it needs. Beach a canoe well up on the bank—even if you have to carry it some distance. Rest it, bottom side up, in some protected spot and forget about it until you are ready to use it again.

In the case of pack and saddle animals see that they have water—if they want it. Then hobble or picket them nearby and let them start grazing while you get your tent up, your fuel supply in and your supper fire going.

Clothing Hooks

A few nails taken along and driven lightly into trees—you can use a rock for a hammer—make handy hooks for clothing or cooking utensils. Pull them out when you leave. That way you can use the nails again at your next campsite, and you won't injure the trees.

A 30 or 50-foot coil of light rope doesn't

weigh much, or take up much room. It's worth taking along. Strung between two trees as a drying line for clothes, or an airing line for camp blankets, you will be glad you brought it. It is better and neater than draping your laundry over bushes, rocks and whatever else you can find in the surrounding landscape. As a matter of fact, whenever weather permits it is an excellent idea to air your blankets about an hour in the late afternoon. Freshens them up wonderfully and your reward is a more comfortable bed and a better sleep.

How the camp chores are divided will necessarily depend on how many are in the party, type of trip and so on. But even if there are only two it is always best to have two men set up the tent together. Two can do not only a faster but a better job than one.

If there are four in the party, while two are setting up the tent another should be rustling up wood and water for the fourth man, Cookie, the High Panjandrum of the Stewpot and Frying Pan. Since most camp cooks are finicky, being artists and a bit on the temperamental side, they generally prefer to rig up the fireplace to suit themselves and to build their own cooking fire. They know just how they want both before they start their magic.

Cookery Hints

A good camp chef knows about how long it is going to take him to prepare any particular meal once he has his fireplace ready and his fire going. The first dishes started therefore are those that require the longest cooking.

Boiled meat, if it is on the menu either alone or in a vegetable stew ought to be set over the fire as soon as possible . . . if you are going to eat it before sundown. It takes from 2 to 2½ hours to get the job done properly. Fresh meat should be started in boiling water. Salt or corned meats, or meat for stews can be started in cold water. A time-saving trick is to give the pieces of meat a slight browning over in a hot skillet while the water is heating.

If vegetables are to be added and cooked with the meat, add them later so they will finish cooking when the meat is done. Allow 20 to 30 minutes for potatoes, 30 to 60 minutes for onions.

Baking potatoes in the ashes of a camp-

(Continued on page 140)

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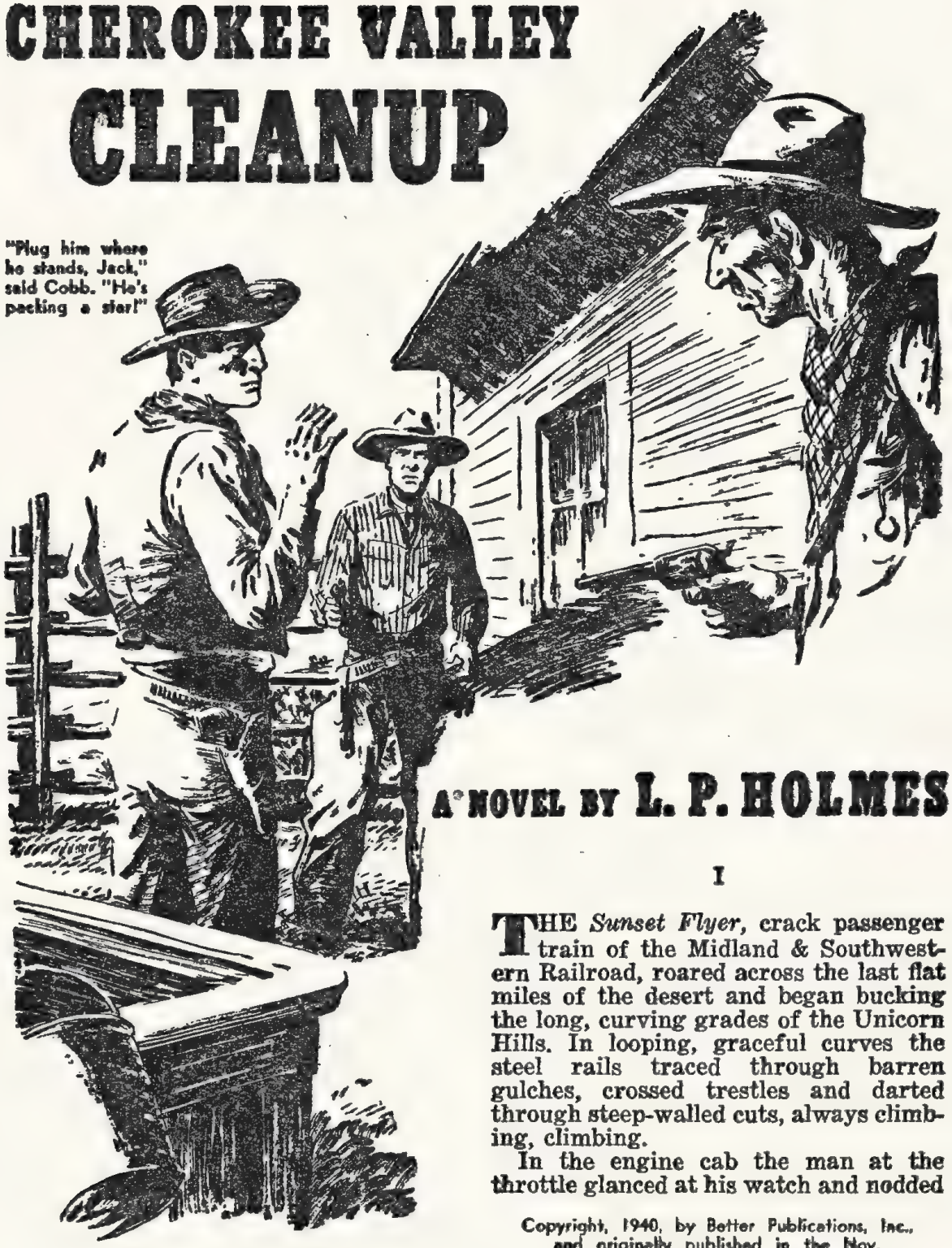

"Plug him where he stands, Jack," said Cobb. "He's packing a star!"

A NOVEL BY L. P. HOLMES

I

THE *Sunset Flyer*, crack passenger train of the Midland & Southwestern Railroad, roared across the last flat miles of the desert and began bucking the long, curving grades of the Unicorn Hills. In looping, graceful curves the steel rails traced through barren gulches, crossed trestles and darted through steep-walled cuts, always climbing, climbing.

In the engine cab the man at the throttle glanced at his watch and nodded

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Following the trail of a stuttering train robber, Lake Cordell hits the realm of an outlaw band where peril and fear ride side by side!

in satisfaction. Across those flat desert miles behind he had made up enough time to compensate for the slower, more laborious drag over the Unicorns.

Back in his seat in the smoker, Lake Cordell stirred his long, lean self from a lazy slouch and looked out at the unfolding contours of the purple hills. He stopped a brakeman passing along the aisle.

"The Unicorns?" asked Cordell.

The brakeman nodded.

"Just an hour from Salt River Junction," he said. "Glad to be getting home, cowboy?"

Lake grinned at the older man.

"Plenty."

He built a cigarette and looked at the hills with increasing interest. He was tickled to death to be getting home. Taking that train load of beef into Kansas City for old "Chuck" York had been an experience, and one he was glad to have known. But when a man was made for the saddle and the open freedom of the range, he soon got fed up on big cities.

Behind it, of course, was the satisfaction of knowing he had fulfilled Chuck York's trust to perfection. He had ridden with the cattle train right into the Kansas City stockyards, had personally okayed the count on unloading and taken over the money for the stock. And four thousand dollars in crisp, new currency was sealed in an envelope and stowed away in the inside pocket of his coat.

LAKE knew he would be glad when that money was placed in Chuck York's gnarled hands. It meant a trust fulfilled. And with old Chris Johnson ready to step down, it probably meant he would be promoted to Chris' job as foreman. With a foreman's wages, it meant that Lake could really begin planning to start a little herd of his own down on that piece of old Morgan range.

Lake was watching the moving hills, dreaming his dream. His wide hat was pushed to the back of his head, showing a mop of tawny hair, boyishly tousled.

Abruptly, the train lurched and began to slow as smoking brake shoes gripped and clung at the wheels. Several short, barking blasts of the whistle sounded. Throughout the coach people stirred. Lake grinned. It was probably some wandering cow critter holding up the right of way.

But the brake shoes gripped tighter and tighter. The train groaned and creaked and finally jerked to a complete stop. A brakeman came in from the rear vestibule and hurried the length of the car. To questions concerning the reason for the stop, he merely shrugged.

The brakeman swung open the door at the front of the car. He cursed involuntarily and staggered back. Looming there just beyond him, were two figures in wide hats and chaps. Across the faces of the two were tightly drawn bandanna handkerchiefs, hiding all their features from the bridge of the nose down. Above these masks, eyes glinted with evil threat. Each of them held a ready gun.

The brakeman made a desperate grab for one of those guns, but missed. The gun spat flame and thunder. The brakeman gasped, doubled at the waist and went down lifelessly.

"That shows we mean business," snarled a harsh voice. "Get your hands up—everybody! Get 'em high and keep 'em there!"

Lake's went up with the other passengers, though inwardly he was raging. His gun! Why had he been fool enough to pack it away in his grip-sack instead of keeping it somewhere on his person? If only that old faithful .45 was within reach! But it wasn't. It was in his grip-sack, resting in the baggage bracket overhead. He had to take this, the same as the rest of the occupants of the car.

Outside, along the full length of the train, sounded a few harsh yells and a number of flatly thudding gun shots. These two bandits were not alone!

They came down the aisle, shoulder to shoulder, ready guns in one hand, open burlap sacks in the other. One of them was silent, but the other spoke steadily, harsh, remorseless threat in every word.

"One at a time—one at a time! We'll tell you when to lower your hands and dig for those valuables. When we tell you, empty your pockets and dump it in the sack. Understand? Anybody gets funny, he'll get the same dose as the brakeman."

Steadily they went down the aisle,

moving ever closer to Lake. He was thinking now of that four thousand dollars in his coat pocket. Well, they wouldn't guess it was there. He would give them his purse and his watch. That ought to satisfy them. Now, they were confronting him.

"Well, well, look what we got here!" the first bandit said. "A saddle scratcher, fresh from the dee-lights of a big city. Either he'll have no money at all, or a lot. Which is it, hombre—which is it?"

LAKE CORDELL

The speaker glared down at Lake, his eyes cold and searching.

"M-maybe he's g-got a g-gun," said the second hold-up man, speaking for the first time. His voice was very guttural, with a queer stammer in it. "We b-better not take ch-chances."

The speaker acted like a striking snake. His gun lifted and fell in a slashing, blue arc. Lake tried to ward off the cruel, treacherous blow. But he was a trifle late. The heavy gun barrel smashed down across his head, and all the world went out in an explosion of crazy lights.

As Lake fell back, the bandit switched his sack to his gun hand and with his free fingers probed Lake's pockets. He found nothing but Lake's watch and that fat, precious envelope. He looked at the latter object curiously, shrugged, dropped it in his sack and moved on.

IN the bunkhouse of the Y-40 cattle spread, Lake Cordell sat on the edge of his bunk and pulled on an old pair of boots. It had been twelve long miles from the scene of the train hold-up to the Y-40, and Lake had walked every step of it.

As he leaned over to buckle on his spurs, Lake had to grit his teeth, for his head felt as though it was split wide open.

"It ain't enough just to say I'm sorry, Chuck," said Lake harshly. "I fell down on bringing your money back to you. Your saying it ain't my fault—that what happened to me might have happened to anybody—maybe so. But that ain't the point. I let a flock of danged killers take the money away from me. Why? Because I didn't have sense enough to keep my gun handy."

"Me," said grizzled old Chuck York slowly, "I'm glad you didn't have your gun handy. Else you'd been shot full of holes. You say there was a good dozen of those bandits. What chance would you have had? You might have got one or two. Then they'd have got you. And what's four thousand dollars against the life of my next foreman? You better take those clothes off and get into yore bunk. With that clubbed head, you're in no condition to ride in to Custer City. I'll send somebody else to carry the news to Bill Teachout."

"No!" Lake rapped a little thickly. "You're just too darn white, Chuck. I'll never be able to hold my head up again, less'n I get your money back for you. That buzzard who gun-whipped me made a mistake. Just before he hit me, he talked. He shouldn't have done that. And he'll find it out one of these days. I'm heading for Custer City. I told those train people I'd get word of the hold-up to Bill Teachout. I don't know when I'll be back, Chuck. But when I do I'll have your four thousand dollars or the equal of it, or know the reason why."

Lake Cordell stood up, buckled on a pair of guns, took a scabbard Winchester and a fleece-lined coat from a wall peg above his bunk and then started for the door.

"I'm wanting a good horse," he said. "I'll take that sorrel Johnny Buckley sold you last fall."

Chuck York followed Lake down to the corrals. The stars were out in all their glory. While Lake brought his saddle from the saddle shed, Chuck roped the Red River sorrel and then snubbed it. And when Lake had finished saddling and was ready to step into the leather, Chuck held out a gnarled hand.

"Good luck, kid," he said. "When you get back, that foreman job will be waiting for you."

Lake swung into the saddle and sat for a moment, staring out into the night.

"Chuck, you make me feel like I'd double-crossed my best friend, losing that money for you," he said. "I'll be back."

Then he sank in the spurs and the Red River sorrel thundered away into the night.

II

SHERIFF BILL TEACHOUT was just locking up his office when Lake Cordell came galloping up through the black shadows of Custer City's lone street. Lake set the foaming sorrel up to a rearing halt and Teachout, catching Cordell's profile against the stars, recognized him.

"Thought you were in Kansas City with a load of beef, Lake," said the sheriff. "When did you get back?"

"Just now," answered Lake shortly. "Let's go inside. I want to talk to you."

Teachout, wondering, unlocked the office door, lighted the lamp and then stared at Lake.

"Well? What's all the mystery about?" he demanded.

"Remember that talk we had six weeks ago, Bill?" Lake asked. "You offered me a job as a deputy. I wouldn't take it then. I want it, now."

"What changed your mind so sudden, cowboy?"

"Plenty," Lake said. "Do I get that star?"

"Why, I reckon so, if you want it that bad. But I'd sure like to know the reason for this sudden change of heart."

"Swear me in first and then I'll tell you."

The sheriff hesitated a moment, then shrugged.

"All right. Lift your right hand."

When Lake had repeated the oath of office, Teachout rummaged in a drawer of his battered desk, found what he wanted and pinned the star on Lake's shirt. Then he sat down and waved Lake to another chair.

"Let's have it," he said bluntly.

"The *Sunset Flyer* was held up at Twelve Mile this afternoon," said Lake.

"What!" Bill Teachout came to his feet with a lunge.

"That's right," Lake said. "About a dozen bandits, all masked, pulled the job. They set fire to the trestle across Twelve Mile Creek to make the *Flyer* stop. They killed the express messenger when they dynamited the express car. Then they went through every coach in the train, robbing the passengers. I was on that train."

He told the sheriff about the four thousand dollars.

Bill Teachout began reaching for various items of equipment.

"All right," he said harshly. "You and me are heading right out for Twelve Mile."

"Not me," said Lake. "You better go out there, Bill. Not that you'll be able to do a blame thing. The bandits are plenty far away now, and I think I know where they are. And that's where I'm heading."

Bill Teachout turned, stared at Lake, then slowly resumed his chair.

"You're right," he said heavily. "Rushing around now can't help things. Let me have all the story."

Lake told him all he knew.

"When I got my senses back," Lake ended, "I was laid up outside on the ground, with them pitching water in my face. Then I heard about the engine crew being killed with the express messenger. I saw the burned trestle and the express car, knocked clear off the rails by the explosion. I volunteered to get word to the nearest sheriff, so walked it from Twelve Mile to the Y-Forty spread. And the killers got away clean except for one thing."

"What was that?" snapped Teachout.

"The hombre who gun-whipped me, he talked a little just before he hit me. And, Bill, I'd heard that voice before. It belongs to Pete Toronto."

"Pete Toronto! You're sure of that?"

Lake nodded.

"Absolutely. You know what a thick, heavy voice he's got, with a sort of stam-

A hoarse wild roar erupted from Pete Toronto's throat

mer in it. I'm certain it was him."

"Then," said Teachout very slowly, "that means the hold-up gang came out of Cherokee Valley."

"Exactly. And I'm going into Cherokee Valley after them."

Teachout got to his feet once more, began pacing up and down the office.

"That's bad," he groaned, "bad if you're right about the bandit gang coming out of Cherokee Valley. Those wild hellions from across the Buckthorns broke two sheriffs before me—Buck Lallemont and Charlie Breck. Unless we can do something about this train hold-up, it means they got my hide hung on a fence. Before they get through they'll have the governor ordering out a troop of cavalry to clean that valley from end to end. I got a good notion to get in touch with him and suggest that very thing!"

"No," said Lake Cordell. "Sit down and cool off, Bill. I think we can handle this chore ourselves, if we go about it right. My idea is that we play the north end of Cherokee Valley against the south end."

"Won't work," said Teachout bluntly. "Charlie Breck had the same idea. I know what you mean—getting Stag Tellifer to help us clean house. But Stag Tellifer won't do it. Kid, there's nothing but a flock of human coyotes in Cherokee Valley and Stag Tellifer is the biggest he-coyote of the bunch."

LAKE shook his head.

"Charlie Breck lost his head just like Buck Lallemont did. He got together a posse and tried to run the Cherokee Valley people all into the next state. It didn't work, and never will. I still say there's a lot of good in the pure Tellifer strain, and if we could once get Stag Tellifer to see the light and how much it means to the Tellifer family proper to make Cherokee Valley a decent, law-abiding stretch of range, we can run the hellions out of the south end of the valley. It's worth trying, anyhow."

Bill Teachout looked at his new deputy, marking the lean, muscular form, the strong, sun-bronzed profile.

"I dunno," said the sheriff doubtfully. "My common sense tells me you ain't got a chance, Lake."

"It's worth a try, Bill," urged Lake. "And if we put it over, it means showing the rest of the world that here is one county that can handle its own troubles."

"All right," Teachout snapped in sudden decision. "I'll back whatever stand you make to the last ditch. But if you don't come out again two weeks from now in one piece, I'll gather a posse and clean that valley from end to end. It'll be a desert when I get through with it, if it costs me my star. When do you leave?"

"At daylight."

"Hit that bunk yonder, kid. I got to go out to Twelve Mile, even if I can't do any good. Good luck, Lake."

They shook hands and Teachout, his arms full of equipment, went out.

"Take my bronc down to the livery barn, Bill," called Lake. "Have Humpy give it rubdown and a good feed."

"Shore," answered Teachout.

Lake pulled off his boots, blew out the lamp and stretched out on the bunk. . . .

The west slope of the Buckthorns was a barren, rocky, arid country, cut by wash and gulch and canyon. It was barbed with jutting spires and battlements of gray, weather-worn rock, with only scattered juniper and cedar and stunted mountain mahogany to clothe its nakedness. But once across the jagged summit, it was a different world. Here were long ridges of towering, cloistered timber—tamarack on the heights, then fir and spruce and sugar pine on the middle and lower reaches.

Riding easily, Lake Cordell revelled in the dim, cool shadow of this lush timber.

Under foot, the deep, soft mat of pine needles gave forth hardly a sound under the swinging hoofs of Lake's bronc. And when Lake came out on the point of a ridge where the timber thinned, he could look all along the length and breadth of Cherokee Valley.

Endless miles of fat range lay there, green along the depths where sparkling water ran, tawny on the rising slope that reached out and through dim, misty distance to the purple bulk of another moutain range, far to the east. Tiny red and white dots on the open range were feeding cattle. And at the left, just visible past the bole of a towering fir, were a cluster of little gray blocks, which were buildings; and a spider web tangle below, which were corrals. This, Lake judged, was the headquarters of the Tellifer family.

When Lake reached the bed of the valley, he struck a broad, much used trail. He turned north, and as he did so, there came the drum of running hoofs. Out of the fringe of timber ahead came a rider—a rider slim and sure and graceful in the saddle, with a mass of brown hair blowing loose over trimly erect shoulders.

Lake reined to a halt and the girl did likewise while she stared at Lake with wide, velvety black eyes. Her face, smooth and full of exhilarated color, paled slightly. Her words came with a breathless explosiveness.

"Who—who are you?" Her voice was melodious.

Lake took off his hat.

"I'm Lake Cordell, ma'am," he said. "I'm looking for the Tellifer headquarters. Is this the trail?"

"This is the trail," she admitted. "What's your business here?"

"I aim to have a talk with Stag Tellifer."

"What kind of a talk?"

Lake grinned.

"Just a talk." He reached automatically for the makings, and the movement threw back the left flap of his worn calfskin vest. The bright glitter of his star shone in the sun.

INSTANTLY the girl was hostile. She reined her dancing bronc back a yard or two.

"You better leave!" she flared. "You're a lawman. And your kind aren't wanted in this valley."

Lake shrugged, building his smoke.

"I'm harmless, far as Stag Tellifer is concerned. I'm not aiming to trouble him."

"You're going to leave," repeated the girl darkly. One slim, brown hand had been fumbling at her saddlebags. Now, that hand came up suddenly, bearing a waspish-snouted revolver of light caliber. "You're going to leave—now!"

Lake looked at the round blue muzzle of the gun, then lifted his cool gray eyes to meet the girl's flashing dark ones. She was a mighty handsome picture, he thought, sitting that nervously dancing horse as though part of the saddle. But all this had no effect on Lake's determination.

"I reckon I'm going to see Stag Tellifer," he drawled quietly. "You might as well put that gun away, ma'am."

"Wrong, lawman," retorted the girl. "You've got less than half a minute to make up your mind."

Lake sighed deeply and made as if to rein his horse around. Instead, he ducked low, drove in the spurs and lifted his bronc ahead in two long, swift leaps.

He saw the bright flame spurt from the gun, heard the sharp, spiteful report. Something jerked at his shirt on the left side, and there was a burn as though a red hot iron had touched there. Then the hurtling shoulder of his mount smashed into the girl's horse, knocking that animal to its knees.

Lake's right arm swept out, catching the girl and lifting her clean from the saddle. His left hand flicked up and caught her wrist, shoving her gun hand straight up in the air.

"You wildcat," he exploded, angrily. "You might have blown my head off!"

"I meant to," she spat. "I will yet. Let me go!"

Held by the remorseless pressure of his right arm, she lay against him, quivering and shaking, her face not a foot from his own. It was a pale angry face now. Against the pallor of it, her lips were like some crimson flower, slightly parted. Her eyes, desperately wide, were a crushed black velvet.

"Let me go!" she cried again.

"You'll drop that gun first," said Lake.

"I—I won't! I'll shoot your black heart out! Let me go!"

Suddenly the humor of all this struck him, and he grinned down at her.

"If you ain't the spiteful demon! Now you drop that gun or I'll have to treat you real rough. I might even kiss you."

"You dare do that and I—I'll—" she stammered to a choked stop.

"Last chance," said Lake. "Drop that gun!"

Lake could feel her slim right wrist stiffen as she clung to the gun all the harder.

"You've made it a bargain," said Lake grimly. And he bent his head and kissed her squarely on her red, slightly parted lips.

For a moment she was utterly motionless. Then she went limp as a rag and the gun fell from her fingers. And Lake, dazed and engulfed by a blinding emotion that struck him suddenly, loosened his grip and allowed her to slide to the ground.

She stood there, staring up at him, her face dead white, her eyes hurt and numbed. Then she ran, her hands over her face, toward her horse, which was stamping nervously nearby. She caught up the reins and struggled blindly into the saddle. And with her head still bowed, she spun her horse and went off at a lashing gallop. The twist of the trail through the timber hid her quickly.

Lake Cordell sat very still in his saddle for a long, long minute, staring at where she had vanished. He cursed himself for his ungentlemanly actions.

It took him some time to get the self-disgust out of his system. Then he shrugged stubbornly and lifted the reins.

"Go and face the music, Mister Cordell," he berated himself. "Whatever you get, you got coming."

He remembered the gun the girl had dropped, leaned far over in the saddle and swept the weapon up from the ground.

Tucking it inside his shirt, he rode along the trail in the direction the girl had gone.

Hardly had Lake vanished from sight, when a lank figure came stealing out of a nearby thicket of jackpines, to stand in the trail and stare with narrowed and evilly flickering eyes along it. The fellow carried a rifle over his arm, and he moved with a slinking, slouching gait. His coarse, black hair hung stringily down about the fringe of his greasy shirt collar. A battered, floppy hat half hid the narrow, wolfish angles of his face. A sly, exultant grin twisted his thin lips.

"Wait till I tell the folks what I saw," he muttered. "That will bring that proud, high-headed Nan Tellifer down to earth. That'll make her realize she better be a little more friendly with Cobb and quit lookin' down her nose at him like he wasn't fit to speak to her. That girl is going to learn her lesson for this. And for that blamed star packer—he won't last no time! When I tell Stag Tellifer about him huggin' and kissin' Nan, old Stag will skin him alive. And if Stag don't—then Cobb shore will!"

III

CLOSE at hand, the Tellifer headquarters were less impressive than at a distance. There were a full score of cabins of various sizes scattered about. There were low-roofed barns and feed sheds, and a wide tangle of sprawling corrals.

When Lake Cordell rode up to the place, he fully expected to be shot out of the saddle before he had had a chance to speak to anyone. The girl had no doubt ridden straight in and reported the indignity she had suffered at his hands. And that sort of thing, if Lake knew his West, meant being shot on sight.

Lake's jaw was set and little trickles of sweat stood out on his face by the time he reached the corrals. But no shot came, nor sight nor sound of anyone, until he had reined in and dismounted.

Then, harsh and brittle, came a rasping command.

"All right, stranger, you can reach! High!"

Lake, his hands lifting slowly toward his ears, turned. A man had stepped from behind a feed shed. He was tall and rawboned, with a lean, dark face and flashing dark eyes. He was young, no older than Lake was. In one hand he held an alertly poised gun.

"You're a stranger in this valley," the man snapped. "What brings you here?"

"I came to have a talk with Stag Tellifer," Lake explained gravely.

"About what?"

"That's between Stag Tellifer and me. Where can I find him?"

"Plug him where he stands, Jack," came a harsh suggestion. "He's packing a star. I can see it under the flap of his vest."

Lake twisted his head again. At the opposite corner of the feed shed stood another man. He was about thirty, with a narrow, wolfish cast to his hard features.

"You keep out of this, Cobb," growled the one called Jack. "I saw that star. I'm taking your guns, stranger. Turn around."

Lake turned and felt the weight of his guns being lifted away.

"Don't you go soft, Jack," Cobb Leach snarled. "You know how the folks in this valley feel toward outside law. I reckon Bill Teachout is up to some tricks. This hombre is a spy out of Teachout's office. The quicker we get rid of him, the better. If you don't want the chore, turn it over to me. I'll make danged sure he'll never bother this valley again."

Something about the plain, lustful cruelty of the fellow got under Lake's skin.

"You would," he said bluntly. "Your kind always does. Honest men feel different."

Lake's inference was plain. Leach's wolfish face flared.

"Why you—" and then came a smashing right into Lake's unprotected face.

It was a wicked punch. Blinding lights flashed before Lake's dazed eyes and he reeled back, almost going down. But the bursting fury that swept over him kept him upright. He saw a wolfish face leering at him and he lunged toward it.

Somebody yelled and a grabbing hand slid off his arm. But Lake Cordell went berserk. All he could see or care about was Leach's leering face. He stabbed a long, jarring left into that face, tipping it back. Then he threw his right, the hardest punch he had ever let go in his life. It carried every ounce of strength and weight he could muster.

The shock of its landing ran all through him. And when Lake charged forward to follow the blow up with another just like it, there was no one in front of him. Instead, he stumbled over a prone figure.

As Lake straightened, a hard and unmistakable object jammed tight against the center of his back.

"That will be about all out of you, lawman," he was told harshly. "Another play like that and I let you have it."

"Go ahead!" blurted Lake thickly, his voice clogged with fury. "That would be just like all these coyotes in Cherokee Valley who call themselves men. Go ahead—shoot!"

"Take it easy—take it easy!" the man told him. "I'm just holding you off for your own good."

A CONFUSED and rising clamor of many voices sounded, and when Lake, shaking the worst of his daze and anger aside, looked around, he saw many men closing in from the various cabins.

In the lead was a tall, gaunt, fierce-eyed man with a dark, hawkish face and a great mane of gray hair.

"What is this, Jack?" came the harsh demand. "You know my rule against brawling around here. What started it?"

The young fellow holding a gun on Lake holstered it.

"This fellow is a deputy out of Bill Teachout's office in Custer City, Dad," he said, then told what happened.

The gray-haired man looked down at Cobb Leach, who was sitting up now, his eyes vacant and stupid.

"He sure got hit, for a fact," said the gray-haired man. He turned and looked at Lake sternly, his fierce gleaming eyes seeming to bore right through him. "Who are you?"

"Lake Cordell, Deputy Sheriff," Lake answered. "I came into this valley for a talk with Stag Tellifer. Looks like I'll have to fight my way through to him. What is he, anyhow—some kind of an emperor?"

"I'm Stag Tellifer," the gaunt man said. "What is it you want to talk about?"

"That's for your ears alone," Lake said simply.

They looked at each other for a moment. Then Stag Tellifer nodded curtly.

"Come along," he said. "I'll talk with you.

"Just a minute!" broke in a thick, strangled voice. "That hombre belongs to me, and I want him!"

It was Cobb Leach. He had struggled to his feet and stood there, his face raging with implacable hatred.

"The best thing you can do," said Stag Tellifer harshly, "is have that face tended to. You look like a mule had kicked you."

"Never mind how I look," snarled Leach. "No star packer can come into this valley and use his fists on me and get away with it. I got first call on him and I want him!"

"Give me back my guns, a little room, and he's got my permission to try and take me," growled Lake.

Stag Tellifer did not appear to hear what Lake said. His words were directed at Cobb Leach and they fairly crackled.

"You got no call to yell," he said. "From what Jack says, you asked for what you got! Go get your face fixed up!"

For a long moment Cobb Leach tried to meet the fierce, gleaming impact of Stag Tellifer's eyes. Finally he shrugged, glared at Lake, turned and slouched unsteadily away.

But now another man came pushing through the crowd. He was a lank, prowling figure with a rifle across his arm.

"Wait a minute, Cobb," he called. "We'll see what Tellifer has to say when I tell him what I know. When I get through talking, he won't give a curse what you do with that star packing hombre."

Leach turned and came back. Stag Tellifer stared at the newest arrival keenly.

"All right, Prowly," he snapped. "What's on your mind?"

Prowly fixed his thin lips into a knowing leer. And with fiendish delight, he told of Lake's kissing Nan Tellifer out on the trail.

For a long moment of dead silence Stag Tellifer stared at the leering informer. When he spoke, there was an icy edge to his voice.

"If you're lying, Prowly Leach, I'll tear your throat out with my bare hands."

So fierce and savage was Stag Tellifer at the moment that Prowly Leach took a backward step. His voice grew shrill.

"Ask this star packin' coyote!" he yelped. "And if he lies, ask Nan!"

Stag Tellifer swung slowly around to face Lake.

"Well," he rasped. "Let's have it. If he's lying, I'll kill him with my bare hands. If he ain't lying—"

The unfinished threat was greater than any spoken one could have been. Lake Cordell knew that he was closer to death than he had ever been before. There was a rising snarl going over the crowd. They were like wolves, beginning to shift restlessly, ready to tear in and rip him to pieces.

Young Jack Tellifer was white of face, except for his black eyes, which were shining with a hard, ruthless light. Stag Tellifer was standing very still, but Lake could sense the white hot storm of fury rising in him.

"Well?" said Stag Tellifer, and his voice was utterly toneless.

LAKE shrugged. He had brought this on himself. That he had meant no indignity to the girl, that his kissing her had been just a blind impulse brought about by her nearness and the wild stirring beauty of her—all this meant nothing to this tightening circle of wolfish listeners. In their eyes there could be no excuse for what he had done. He doubted that they would even listen to him all the way through.

But there was one thing. No matter what came, he wasn't going to quail or cower. He'd take his medicine standing up.

"Well," he said stonily. "I reckon he's—"

"Wait!"

Nan came driving through the crowd, forcing a way with her lithe young strength. She caught Stag Tellifer by the elbows and pushed him back a step.

"You've got to listen to me, Dad," she cried. "And you've got to listen all the way through. It—it was as much my fault as it was his."

Stag Tellifer stared down at his daughter as though he did not see her. Jack Tellifer stepped forward and caught his slim sister by the shoulder, jerking at her. His voice rose to a yell.

"You mean you made up to this—this—"

A quiet, straight dignity lifted her head high and silenced him.

"You needn't yell at me, Jack Tellifer," she retorted. "If you'd listen a minute and not take all that sneaking, filthy Prowly Leach says as gospel, you'd learn something."

"I am learning something," said Jack Tellifer in a strangled voice.

"Shut up, Jack," Stag Tellifer commanded tonelessly. "We'll listen to her. But it better make sense, for she's not too old for a whipping."

Indignant color burned through the pale curves of the girl's face, and the look of a hurt child came into her velvet black eyes.

Lake couldn't stand any more.

"Don't tell 'em a word, ma'am," he growled. "They don't deserve it—either of them. To you I'm apologizing, for what I did. And if either of these brave gents want to whip anybody, they can start in on me. You hear that, you two?" he blazed at the two Tellifers, father and son.

Jack Tellifer, white with anger, started for Lake, who squared off to knock him senseless. But the girl jumped between them and beat her brother's chest with small, frantic fists.

"No!" she pleaded. "Jack, will you listen? Dad—please! This is all so foolish."

"Hold it, Jack," ordered Stag Tellifer. "Let's hear what she has to say."

The girl spoke quickly, almost breathlessly. In short choppy sentences, Nan

told the listeners how she had come across Lake, and the conversation that passed between them.

"I told him I'd shoot him if he didn't leave," she finished. "He didn't bluff. He spurred his bronc into mine and I shot at him. Then he grabbed me out of the saddle and told me to drop the gun. I wouldn't drop it. He gave me another chance, and told me he'd k-kiss me if I didn't drop it. I hung on to the gun. S-so he kissed me. Then he let me go. Now, you see how silly you're all acting."

Stag Tellifer's laugh was like a harsh cough.

"But, Dad," she cried desperately. "Don't you see, I could have dropped the gun!" Her face was flaming crimson as she finished, her voice dropping swiftly so that she almost whispered the last.

"So that's it," yelled Jack Tellifer. "You could have, but you didn't. You wanted him to kiss you. You little fool! Wanting to be kissed by every stray whelp that comes along!"

That made Lake go berserk. Queerly enough, a crazy, unreasoning thrill ran through him at the thought of that kiss. But the fact that she had to bare her secret feelings to these unreasoning, wild devils, set him raging. And because Jack Tellifer was the nearest to him and because of what young Tellifer just said to his sister, Lake leaped at him tigerishly.

"Of all the lowdown—" he blazed in anger.

He smashed fiercely into Jack Tellifer, driving him back. He drove two short, hooking blows to young Tellifer's face, knocking him down. Lake followed his man to the ground, smashing at him savagely.

Through the mist of his rage, Lake heard a startled roar erupt from Stag Tellifer, heard a thin wail of fright from the girl. Then, a tide of smashing, clawing, cursing men rolled over him, dragging him from Jack Tellifer, kicking him, beating at him with fists, gun butts or whatever they could lay hands on.

Lake fought back madly. He drove his fists into cursing faces and for one thrilling moment, beat his way clear. Then his feet were cut off under him, and he went down under the raging avalanche. Crashing blows fell on his face, his head. Boots thudded against his helpless body. His senses began to slip. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. And then he was falling into utter blackness.

IV

WHEN Lake Cordell got his senses back, he was sicker than he had ever been before in his life. His head, still tender from that gun-whipping on the train, was numbed in agony. He was conscious of the fact that his head hurt terribly, that his throat was thick and harsh and parched for water, and that his ribs and body ached with stiffness and bruises.

He knew these things because they were purely physical reactions. But he could fathom nothing, aside from the fact that he was conscious.

It seemed that he remained for eons on this hazy borderland of light and darkness, before he gained a definite step for the better. This improvement came when someone began bathing his head with cold water. Then a long drink of that same icy, delicious water was allowed to trickle down his eager throat,

[*Turn page*]

and steaming compresses were laid over his bruised ribs.

It seemed as though a bell clanged softly in his mind and all the hazy fragments of thought rushed together and coalesced. After that, his mind began to function, slowly but definitely. When he opened his eyes, he did so painfully, for they were badly bruised and swollen.

The late afternoon sunlight, streaming through a window above the bunk on which Lake lay, stung those swollen eyes. Two women were bending over him, gray-haired women, with patient, sad faces, with eyes full of gentleness and pity.

"Where—where am I?" blurted Lake thickly.

One of the women laid a cool hand on his lips.

"Hush! You mustn't try to talk. Here, drink this."

Lake obediently gulped a cup of some kind of dark, bitter fluid. Then, a soothing relaxation ran through him. It made him drowsy and he slept.

When he awakened again, the room in which he lay was cool and shadowy. Lake felt amazingly better. His head was sore, but that horrible, numbing ache was gone. His throat was cool and, though his body was stiff and sore, there was a fountain of new strength flowing through him. And he was hungry, ravenously so.

The bunk on which he lay, couched warmly with thick blankets, stood in a small, square, log-walled room. There was a single window above the bunk, and a heavy door at one end. Besides the bunk, the only furnishings were a pair of home-made stools and a small home-made table. On the table stood a bucket with a tin cup hanging on its rim.

"Water," Lake decided. "I could stand a long drink of it."

He pushed aside the blankets and sat up. There was a short period of dizziness, then his head cleared again. He was a little unsteady on his feet at first, but a long drink of the icy water put new vigor and strength into him. When he looked around, he saw his clothes hanging on a wall peg at the head of the bunk.

He dressed, found the makings and had a smoke. Only one thing was wrong. His shirt and his star were missing. The shirt he now donned was clean and new, but it was too snug across the shoulders.

Lake managed a wry grin.

"Those wild devils shore worked me over," he mused. "From a brash officer of the law, here I am, a well guarded prisoner in Cherokee Valley. I'll bet a cookie that door is locked."

It was, securely, and evidently barred on the outside. And the window had two bars of well seasoned mountain hickory bolted across it.

"Stag Tellifer's pet calaboose," decided Lake.

The window faced the west, and through it Lake could see the bulk of the Buckthorn Mountains rising, all pink and misty before the reflection of the nearing sun. Lake could see several cabins, also, and from them threads of smoke were rising, straight and blue in the still air.

Lake sauntered back and forth across the narrow confines of his prison, working the stiffness from his body and shoulders. His thoughts made him a little grim about the mouth. It seemed that Bill Teachout had been right about these Cherokee Valley people, from Stag Tellifer down. And how he had bungled his part! All because of that wild slip of a girl.

The thought of Nan Tellifer sent a truant thrill leaping through him. Maybe the rest of the people in this valley were mavericks, but not that girl! He remembered her as she had stood before her father fighting valiantly for him. And he remembered that low-voiced admission that she could have dropped the gun and saved herself the indignity of being kissed. And the inference that every listener had drawn from that admission.

But, of course, she had wanted them to draw that conclusion for only one purpose. She could see the desperate straits he was in, and that admission had been a last, generous effort on her part to try and save his skin.

LAKE shook his head savagely. This was no time and place to be playing with romantic thoughts. His business in Cherokee Valley was to run down those bandits and killers who had held up the train and stolen, among other things, four thousand of Chuck York's money. He was here as a lawman out of Bill Teachout's office, and his chore was to get those killers and bandits, not go falling in love with the daughter of the

he-wolf himself, old Stag Tellifer.

Lake was in a trap, up to his eyes. These wild devils had shown him how they felt by the way they had gone after him. Lake wondered what had kept them from actually beating him to death while they had the chance. Another thing, he had definitely forfeited any hope of help and backing by Stag Tellifer in his effort to round up and clean out the actual criminal element in Cherokee Valley.

Lake groaned and paced up and down. Some lawman he was! Some deputy! What a fool he had made of himself!

At sun-up they brought him breakfast. It was one of those gray-haired, sad-faced, gentle-eyed women who had cared for him. But when the door opened and she came in, bearing a rough wooden tray loaded with steaming dishes, Lake glimpsed a man beyond that open door, a man with a rifle over his arm. He was a prisoner sure enough.

"You shouldn't have gotten up and dressed so soon," the woman remonstrated quietly. "You had a very close call, cowboy."

"Blame it on my doctor and nurse, ma'am," said Lake in sincere gallantry. "You and your helper were wonders. I feel fine now—honest. I'm thanking you, ma'am."

The woman watched him while he ate, her gentle eyes growing even softer. He was young, clean-cut, good to look at, with an intriguing boyishness about him when he dropped the mask of sterner maturity. He was much too young and gallant to die. Yet, she was afraid—

She remained while Lake finished his breakfast, then went out as quietly as she had entered. And an hour later the door of Lake's prison opened again. This time it was Stag Tellifer, his son Jack, and Cobb Leach with him. Lake was sitting on his bunk, and he remained there quietly, waiting for them to speak.

Stag Tellifer's face was fiercely stern, but there was a troubled gleam in his deep-set eyes. Young Jack Tellifer, his face showing the effects of Lake's fists, looked subdued and thoughtful. Cobb Leach, his face also swollen and bruised was frankly antagonistic. He leered at Lake.

"Well, you wise polecat," he spat, "what do you think of the set-up now?"

Lake looked at him with quiet contempt.

"As long as your breed ain't bossing this valley, I'll rest easy," he retorted.

"When me and my kind get through with you, you'll sing a different song," Leach laughed brutally. "Get over what you're going to say, Stag. Me and the boys are anxious to take this jasper on a little ride—his last ride."

Stag Tellifer did a surprising thing. He whirled on Cobb Leach savagely.

"Don't ever forget this one thing, Leach," he growled. "No matter what this council decided, you're answerable to me. I might get the idea to call you out and blow your heart out. I'm not sure but what it might help things a lot—for everybody."

Leach shrugged sulkily.

"You can't go against the council," he retorted. "You don't dare."

"I'll dare anything, if I make my mind up to it," rumbled Stag Tellifer.

It was plain that Cobb Leach feared the fiery old boss of Cherokee Valley.

Stag Tellifer turned and looked long at Lake, who met the searching glance coolly.

"You've got sand," he said abruptly. "And no matter what a man does, if he's got sand in his craw, I can respect him. I reckon you'd rather have the truth, straight out. The council met last night, and their decision went against you, Cordell. It looks like you're through."

"I thought you were the boss of this valley," said Lake. "That what you said goes? What is this council?"

"Something we've had in the valley for a long time. The members meet to decide on things of real importance affecting the valley."

Lake gave a mirthless grin.

"Well, it's usual for the condemned to have a few last favors granted 'em," he said. "I'd still like to have that talk with you, Tellifer—alone."

Stag Tellifer stared long at him, then nodded slowly.

"Fair enough," he said. "Jack, you and Leach clear out."

"No go," spat Leach quickly. "I'm not taking my eyes off that jasper until he's dead."

"You heard what Dad said," Jack Tellifer snapped. "We're leaving, you and me. Now! You first, Leach."

"What the devil is the matter around here?" blustered Cobb Leach, though he moved toward the door. "You two act like you didn't like me, as though you had it in for me!"

"Maybe you're right on both counts," Jack said curtly. "Get going."

WHEN the door closed behind the two men, Lake spoke quietly.

"Good stuff in Jack," he said. "Sorry I hit him yesterday, but I was pretty mad. I hope he's apologized to Nan."

"He has," said Stag drily. "Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No. What do you know about that train hold-up at Twelve Mile, Tellifer?"

"Train hold-up?" Stag Tellifer stared. "At Twelve Mile? Why do you ask me that? Think I've turned to train robbery for a living?"

"Somebody in Cherokee Valley has," said Lake crisply. "And while I may be up against it, you and Cherokee Valley are up against it worse. There was a train hold-up and four of the train crew were murdered. The bandits came out of Cherokee Valley. Chew on that, Tellifer. It's a big mouthful."

"A big mouthful—if it's true," agreed Tellifer soberly.

"Do you think I rode into this valley just to peddle fairy tales?"

Tellifer began to pace the floor.

"I'd still like to see some proof that Cherokee Valley men pulled that hold-up," he said.

"Is Pete Toronto a Cherokee Valley man, Tellifer?"

"Why, yes. Toronto hangs out with the crowd in the south end of the valley."

"Pete Toronto was one of those bandits."

"Suppose you tell me the whole story," said Tellifer.

Lake did so. As he listened, Stag Tellifer's face grew more savagely grim.

"Why did Bill Teachout send you here, instead of coming himself?" he demanded.

"Because I asked him to. I wanted to recover that four thousand dollars of Chuck York's money. I figured there was a way to bring Cherokee Valley to its senses, without calling a posse."

"And what was that way?"

"Lay all the cards in front of you and ask you to help clean up the no-good element in the valley."

Stag Tellifer laughed harshly.

"You're quite an optimist, Cordell."

Lake got to his feet and faced the gray-haired, savage-faced old man.

"Outside of this valley most folks think the real Tellifer strain is pretty good blood, and if given a chance would even make good, law-abiding citizens. But they know there's a lot of riff-raff in the southern end of the valley—outlaws, rustlers and the like who have holed up in Cherokee because they figure to be safe from the law here. Men like Pete Toronto. Sooner or later, Cherokee Valley is going to be tamed, if it takes an appeal to the governor of the state for troops to do it. And that is the idea playing around in Bill Teachout's head right now.

"If that set-up ever comes to pass, Tellifer, you'll be cleaned out with the rest. Bill Teachout can get the whole state behind him on this train hold-up job. And if you think you can lick the state, Tellifer, you're not as smart as I think you are. On the other hand, if you want to back up Bill Teachout, help him clean the mavericks out of the valley, there's a real future for the Tellifer family."

Stag Tellifer prowled back and forth across the little room, a look of almost haggard desperation in his deep eyes. Lake knew that his argument had struck deep. Suddenly, Tellifer whirled on him.

"Why in blazes did you have to kiss Nan, Cordell?" he demanded. "That has the whole valley up on its ear. If you'd have come in quietly, we could have laid our plans and probably done something."

"I tried to come in quietly," answered Lake. "But everywhere, I was met with suspicion and hate. I'm sorry about your daughter. I meant no harm. She told you the real truth of what happened."

"Now that I've calmed down, I know you meant no disrespect for Nan," admitted Tellifer. "And I've had another talk with her. If it was all left up to me, Cordell, you'd ride out of Cherokee free. But the council—"

"The devil with the council!" flared Lake. "If you leave it up to a narrow-minded bunch of mavericks to run this valley, they'll run it to ruin. And you with it. If you're the accepted boss of the valley, show it!"

"What would you have me do?" Tellifer asked.

"Fight! Fight to give your daughter a chance to be something better than a maverick girl from an outlaw valley.

To give your son, Jack, a chance to face the world as an honest man, instead of gradually drifting down to the level of that bunch of hellions in the south end of the valley. Fight—and give me a chance to fight!"

Stag Tellifer looked at Lake intently, his piercing eyes taking on a gradually rising glow. Suddenly his hand shot out.

"Shake, Cordell," he said spiritedly. "You've made my mind up for me. A showdown in this valley had to come. I've realized that for a long time. The mavericks, as you call 'em, have been growing stronger and stronger. I couldn't see a way out, but now you've named it for me. Fight! I can figure on a certain amount of backing. The old-timers will stick by me. Yeah, we'll fight. The devil with the council!"

Tellifer stepped to the window and looked out. He went to the door and listened. Then he whirled, jerked a gun from his belt and handed it to Lake, butt first.

"The safest place for you right now, is over at my cabin," he said. "We're going there. Come on."

Tellifer swung open the door and stepped out, Lake close behind him.

V

THE guard, who had been standing a few yards distant, turned. At sight of Lake he started to lift his rifle, but found himself looking into the muzzle of Stag Tellifer's remaining gun.

"Drop it, Turk," cracked Tellifer. "Keep your mouth shut and walk along with us. That's right. Keep a little bit ahead."

The guard cursed harshly.

"What you trying to do, Stag?" he demanded.

"Keep your mouth shut and march!" Stag ordered.

The guard marched.

Stag Tellifer was measuring the distance to the main cabin. They were halfway there, when a harsh yell of surprised anger sounded, and Cobb Leach ran into view, down by the corrals. In back of him was Jack Tellifer.

Cobb Leach was fumbling for a gun when Stag Tellifer yelled.

"Back my hand, Jack!" he yelled. "'Back my hand!"

Jack Tellifer did not hesitate. He pulled his gun and smashed Cobb Leach over the head with it. As Leach went down in a heap, Jack Tellifer started for the main cabin at a run. Instinctively, he seemed to realize his father's objective.

But now, another figure with venomous eyes hove into view at a corner of the corrals. He carried a rifle and he jerked it up, leveling it across a corral post and bearing down on Jack Tellifer's back. There was killing fury in Prowly Leach's narrowed eyes as he squinted deliberately over the sights.

What Lake did was purely automatic. He flung a snap shot across his body. Prowly Leach jerked back, and the *spang* of his rifle was like a whip crack. The bullet, missing Jack Tellifer by mere inches, spewed into the earth in front of him. Then Prowly Leach went down in a still, awkward tangle.

The guard yelled savagely. And in a surprise sideways leap, he crashed into Stag Tellifer and knocked him down. He was trying to claw Stag's gun from him when Lake gun-whipped him efficiently. Lake dragged Stag Tellifer to his feet again, and in another moment they plunged to safety through the door Jack Tellifer was holding open for them.

Jack slammed shut the heavy door and dropped a stout bar into place. Then he turned on his father.

"Dad, what the devil—" he began.

There was a reckless glitter in Stag Tellifer's eyes.

"The Tellifer family is going in for real respectability, son," he said. "And you better shake hands with Cordell here. Prowly Leach was sighting down on you cold when Cordell got him with as pretty a shot as I ever saw. We Tellifers are going somewhere, or nowhere, Jack. And we'll go together."

As Jack Tellifer stared at his father, a glow came into his lean cheeks.

"I been waiting a long time for you to say something like that, Dad," he said. "I'm glad. Thanks, Cordell, for saving my life."

Lake shook the outstretched hand.

"Call everything even, Jack," he said, smiling. "We'll be friends from now on."

Outside, a rifle snarled and a bullet smashed into the log wall of the cabin.

"Lucky I built this cabin stout," said Stag Tellifer. "It'll have to stop a lot of those, I reckon. Jack, make a round-

up of all the guns and ammunition in the place."

As Jack hurried quickly from the room, Nan Tellifer came in. Her velvet black eyes were wide and startled.

"Dad, what's the shooting about?" she asked. "What—" She broke off suddenly as she saw Lake. Soft color flowed up in her slender throat.

Stag Tellifer walked over and put an arm about her.

"Child," he said, "after all these years your old Dad has come to his senses. We're going to put some polish on the Tellifer name. Just you sit tight and keep away from windows. And I want you to know that I'm accepting Lake Cordell here as a friend and partner in need."

The girl was plainly bewildered.

"I—I don't understand, Dad," she stammered. "Has the council changed its mind?"

"I've changed my mind," said Stag Tellifer crisply. "The Tellifers are going to show the world they're respectable people, not a flock of outlaws and mavericks."

NAN TELLIFER stared at her father with shining eyes. Then she wrapped her arms about his neck, pulled his head down and kissed him.

Jack Tellifer came hurrying into the room then.

"There's five rifles, including that light carbine of Nan's," he announced. "And half a dozen belt guns and a pretty fair amount of cartridges."

"We'll have help," said Stag confidently. "Wait until they get over the excitement outside and have a chance to talk things over. Then we'll hear from them. Jack, you and Cordell watch things out back. I'll keep track of things here."

Jack led the way through the big cabin, out into a spotless kitchen. The whole place, Lake observed, possessed that homey charm and comfort that reflects a woman's touch. In addition to being a courageous beauty, Nan was evidently an excellent housekeeper.

There was little to guard against out back. Peering cautiously through a kitchen window, Lake could see a few of the other cabins. Women passed from one cabin to another, or gathered in little groups, talking excitedly. Now and then one of them would point to the main cabin. Once or twice Lake glimpsed a man, but most of them were evidently gathered somewhere out front.

There was no more shooting, even out front.

A quarter of an hour passed, and Nan came into the kitchen.

"Jack," she told her brother, "Dad wants you and Mister Cordell. I'll watch here."

"Keep away from the windows, Sis," warned Jack. "Some fool might throw a shot."

"I don't think so, Jack," she said. "Right now they want to talk. Buck Henshaw is coming up to the house with his hands up."

Lake and Jack hurried out. Nan waited until she heard the rumble of their voices as they spoke to her father, then, quickly she opened the back door, slipped out and walked quickly toward a group of watching and wondering women.

"Buck" Henshaw was a gaunt, powerful patriarch, bearded to the eyes.

He had stopped twenty yards from the house and the rumble of his voice carried clear and mild.

"The folks don't understand this, Stag," he called. "They sent me to find out what's wrong. I'm coming in."

"Come on, Buck," answered Stag. "You can put your hands down. I got no quarrel with my old friends."

Jack opened the door and Buck Henshaw stepped in, his shaggy-browed eyes fixed on Lake.

"Have you gone crazy, Stag? Harboring an hombre that just killed one of our folks?" he growled.

"You mean Prowly Leach?" asked Stag.

Henshaw nodded.

"Do you know why Cordell dropped Prowly?" Stag continued. "Prowly was all set to shoot Jack in the back, but Cordell beat him to it. If he hadn't, Jack would be laying out there with a hole through him."

Buck Henshaw combed his beard with thoughtful fingers.

"But Turk Ebaugh says Jack gun-whipped Cobb Leach to start all the trouble," he pointed out.

"Jack gun-whipped Cobb in an effort to keep trouble from starting," corrected Stag. "Cobb was getting ready to throw a gun on me and Cordell. And Ebaugh tried to knock me down and

get my gun away from me. So Cordell tapped him on the head with a gun barrel. Ebaugh and Cobb Leach are of the same stripe, Buck—no good," he ended bluntly.

Henshaw nodded slowly.

"That may be so, Stag. Yet, they're Cherokee Valley folks. You ain't aiming to go against the decision of the council, are you?"

"I'm going to give the council a chance to change its mind, Buck, because it was wrong. Get hold of Tom Rhodes, Link and Dennis Rhybom, Lee Leslie and Gramp Porter, and bring 'em here."

Henshaw stared at him a moment.

"I'll get 'em," he agreed.

Henshaw went out. And a short while later, he returned to the cabin with the men Stag asked for. They came in, the six of them. Behind them Jack barred the door.

"Sit down and take it easy, boys," Stag said. "First, maybe I better explain how Prowly Leach came to get his. Then your minds won't be clouded with mad."

He did explain, tersely, quietly.

"That's the simple truth," he ended. "It was a case of Jack or Prowly and, naturally, I'm glad that it was Prowly."

"We'll let that ride, Stag," rumbled Buck Henshaw. "What we want to know is why you're going against the decision of the council."

Stag Tellifer squinted thoughtfully at that.

"I'm going to let Lake Cordell talk to you fellows," he said. "Lake, tell 'em what you told me, over in that other cabin."

LAKE faced the six men. In their eyes he could read nothing but hostility and suspicion. But when he spoke, his words were as startling to young Jack Tellifer as to the others. So engrossed were they in his speech, no one heard the subdued rustling in the rear of the house, the soft, cautious steps gathering in the adjoining room.

"The fate of this valley and all the people in it, is in the hands of you decent men," Lake ended. "Bill Teachout is willing to give you the chance to clean your own house. But the time has come when you've got to put aside all the old ideas about clannish loyalty and protecting no-good killers and train bandits, just because they happen to be Cherokee Valley men. Either all the people in Cherokee Valley will be good, law-abiding people, or they'll be mavericks and outlaws. And I think it high time that the women and kids of this valley had a chance."

"That's right," broke in a quiet voice. "It's high time Cherokee Valley women had something to say. And they're going to say it."

Into the room stepped a gaunt, stoop-shouldered woman.

"Mother Corbin!" ejaculated Stag Tellifer. "How—where—"

"Through the back door, Stag," said Mother Corbin. "Nan came after me and some of the others. They're in the next room, ready to back me up. You men—" she looked around the room—"know what happened to my husband and my son. They died in a gun-fight. Cherokee Valley did that to them. When has Cherokee Valley ever brought any happiness to any woman? Never! Do we see our children growing up to get a bit of learning, to know a decent future? No. We see them grow up wild as animals!

"This young feller"—she pointed at Lake—"represents the outer world where folks can live decent and happy. He's giving us a chance to be humans. And just because he punched Cobb Leach we were going to take him out and kill him. We're fools! We have been fools for years and years! And we women demand that you men show some sense. We're tired of living like animals. We want a chance to be known to the rest of the world as decent people. We want our children to have a chance!"

Mother Corbin's head was high, her eyes flashing as she finished. The men were still, all except Stag Tellifer.

"Thanks, Mother Corbin," he said quietly. "Thanks."

Mother Corbin went out then, clothed in a strange dignity that left the men still and bewildered and shame-faced.

Buck Henshaw cleared his throat harshly.

"It'll be us against the south end of the valley," he said. "That means fight."

"It means fight," Stag Tellifer agreed, nodding. "Even in our past ignorance we drifted into two camps. The best of us stayed in the north end of the valley, while the worst gathered in the south end. We allowed that bad spot in the valley to grow. Now, it's up to us to clean it out. Are we men enough to do

it—for the women and kids?"

"Yes," said Tom Rhodes simply. "We'll round up the younger men and hammer them into line. And as long as it has to be done, we better hit the maverick camp before they learn too much about what's going on. I vote that we ride tonight."

Nan Tellifer burst into the room suddenly.

"Dad!" she cried. "Cobb Leach, Turk Ebaugh and Fox Steele just headed out at a gallop along the main trail—heading south!"

"That settles it," growled Buck Henshaw. "We'll ride tonight."

VI

PURPLE twilight lay over Cherokee Valley. Down at the corrals of the Tellifer headquarters, horses were being caught and quickly saddled. Men were gathered there, almost two dozen in all. Some were old, some were young, but all were heavily armed.

Stag Tellifer, Tom Rhodes, Buck Henshaw and the other older men had talked grimly but persuasively, and the response of the younger men had been surprisingly quick. It was as though younger minds and younger hearts had known a yearning for better things for Cherokee Valley all along.

"The young hellers had more savvy than we did all along, Stag," said Tom Rhodes in self-reproach.

They were ready to ride finally, and the men scattered momentarily to say good-by to families, mothers, wives, children, sweethearts. There were some quiet tears and many fearful hearts, but the purpose of this regeneration was burning strong, and there was no faltering.

A few of the very oldest men were being left behind to guard the headquarters and the women and kids.

Lake Cordell found himself alone, standing there beside the corrals. A queer pang of loneliness shot through him. These other men, despite the drawbacks life had saddled them with, still had someone who cared, something to fight for. While he—he had the law to fight for, of course, and the debt of honor he felt about the four thousand dollars of Chuck's money. Yet, right now, he wished there was something as vital and personal in this impending conflict for him, as there was for the others of the valley.

Something stirred in the gloom, nearby. Lake turned, then stood very still. Nan looked like some slender, graceful shadow.

"I wanted to wish you luck, Lake Cordell," she said softly.

"Nan!" Lake breathed. "After what I did, you're this generous?"

Nan was twisting her hands in shy, nervous confusion.

"You've done more for this valley than you'll ever know," she said. "You woke it up. You made Dad and the others see the truth. Good luck, Lake."

Then she was gone, as lightly and swiftly as she had come.

The men returned to their horses and mounted. And then, the dark grim bulk of men and horses were moving, and Lake was with them.

A mile down the valley Stag Tellifer called a halt.

"We'll split up," he announced grimly. "I'll head one party; Lake Cordell the other. Jack, you go with Lake to show him the way. Cut over to the east and get down in back of South Camp. Then come on in. Those who surrender, give a fair chance. Those who won't, kill."

Lake and Jack Tellifer rode silently side by side, leading their group. Soon, the hills that rimmed the eastern edge of Cherokee lifted cold and black above them to their left. After that it was straight south.

On the point of a low ridge that reached out into the valley from the eastern hills, Jack Tellifer reined in and pointed.

"South Camp, Lake," he said.

"You boys know all about that train robbery by this time," said Lake to the men. "I came into Cherokee Valley primarily to round up that hold-up crew. I want to take Pete Toronto alive, if possible, so we can maybe learn the names of the others."

"Pete's a skunk," said one of the riders. "I'm doubtin' you'll be able to make him talk, Cordell."

"I can try," Lake said.

They rode on then, swinging about in a half circle which left them directly south of the lights of the south camp. Jack Tellifer halted again.

"Close enough," he said grimly. "We'll wait until things start."

"How about you and me going in now on foot, Jack?" said Lake. "I'd like to try and get a line on some of those train bandits before the big ruckus starts, if I can."

Jack hesitated, then stepped from his saddle.

"I'll go with you," he said. "You other boys know what Dad's orders were. Stay here until the ruckus starts, then come in. Let's go, Lake."

They went off, side by side, and were soon swallowed in the gloom. They covered three hundred yards before they came to the outskirts of South Camp.

It was an ugly, sprawling layout of shacks and shanties, grouped roughly about a central square of open ground some hundred yards across.

There were hitch-racks about the sides of that central square, with a smattering of ponies tied there. The lights from the buildings did not penetrate very far, and the middle of the square was shrouded in darkness.

LAKE CORDELL and Jack Tellifer slid between two buildings, ducked under a hitch-rack and moved out into the cover of that darkness. They stopped there to look around and plot their next moves. From one of the buildings sounded the tinny plunking of a banjo and a couple of hoarse voices raised in drunken, ribald song.

"Sweet layout, eh, Lake?" murmured Jack. "I'm plumb ashamed to have an outsider see this snake's nest we Cherokee people have let grow up among us."

"Forget it," answered Lake. "After tonight it won't be here any more. I wish I knew where to locate Pete Toronto. We haven't much time. Your father is liable to come storming in any time now."

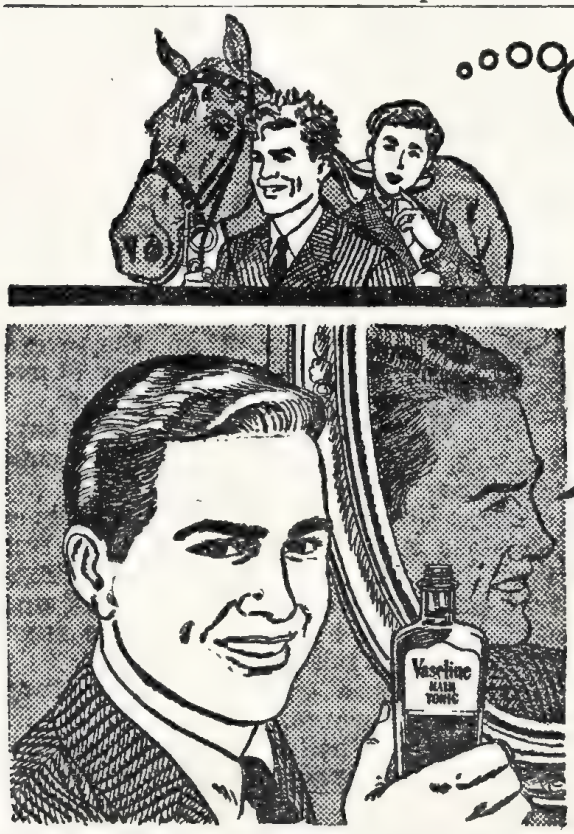
"Let's sort of make a circle as close as we can to the honkytonks, and see what we can see," suggested Jack.

They did this, moving cautiously along just outside the hitch-rails, looking in through open doors and windows. Abruptly, Jack halted and caught Lake by the arm.

"There!" he breathed, pointing. "There's your man. And Cobb Leach and Turk Ebaugh are with him!"

The place was a roughly furnished barroom, with poker tables scattered about. Toronto and Leach and Ebaugh were grouped at the bar, engaged in some kind of argument.

[*Turn page*]



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"Jack," Lake muttered, "when I first rode into your headquarters, was Cobb Leach there? How long had he been there?"

"Why he just rode in about an hour before you showed up," Jack Tellifer answered. "Ebaugh and Fox Steele were with him."

"Then they could have been in that hold-up along with Toronto and the others. How about Prowly Leach?"

"I hadn't seen Prowly for over a week up until he came in to tell about you and Nan."

"Then he could have been in it, too. Jack, I wonder could we get in close enough to hear what they're talking about?"

Jack nodded in agreement.

They ducked under a hitch-rail and stole silently in toward the open door, stopping just outside the pale flare of light that lanced the darkness. Lake pressed close to the wall and edged right up to the door. But he listened in vain, for the words of the group inside were just a murmur.

A rider came galloping into the square then, coming in from the west. He swung his bronc to a sudden halt, dismounted, ducked under the rail and walked toward the open door. Abruptly, he sensed the presence of those two still, watchful figures. He stopped and stepped back.

"*Quien es?*" he demanded. "Who is it?"

Lake's reply was a hard, smashing right-hand punch. It caught the fellow on the jaw, just as he started to open his mouth to shout an alarm. Lake and Jack Tellifer descended on him like an avenging tide. As the newcomer sagged limply, they caught him and lugged him swiftly out into the sheltering blackness of the square.

"It's Fox Steele," Jack panted softly. "You're in luck, Lake. This hombre's backbone ain't very stout. If you can get any of that crowd to talking, here's your man."

The quick, heated action had set the broncos along the hitch-rail to stamping and snorting uneasily at their tethers. It attracted the attention of those in the barroom, and it was the squat figure of Pete Toronto who came to the door. He called the others out.

"What's wrong," growled Cobb Leach. "You're jumpy as an old woman, Pete."

"These b-broncs," answered Toronto in his guttural, slightly stammering voice. "Somethin' spooked 'em. D-dang it, Cobb. I tell you I g-got a queer feeling that s-something's due to break. We better c-call the gang together, split that stuff and g-get out of here."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Leach. "We're safe here—safer than any other place we could go to. Besides, I'm not ready to leave Cherokee Valley. Before I'm done I'm going to take this whole place over."

"You're not fooling me, Cobb," answered Toronto sullenly. "It's that Tellifer girl you're locoed about. The other boys and m-me are satisfied with w-what we got out of that t-train job. We aim t-to scatter."

"There'll be no moving until I give the word," said Leach. "That's final."

"I wish Fox would show up," said Turk Ebaugh. "I got a hunch there's dynamite brewing up north. I wish—"

Turk Ebaugh did not finish. At the northern end of the squalid little town a single shot sounded, then a long, rolling shout. And then, hurtling riders came thundering into the square!

VII

FOR a moment South Camp was still, as though shaken by a blow. Then, all over the place sounded startled yells, as men came rushing from this cabin and that. Guns began to snarl. Tethered broncs began to rear and fight their tie-ropes.

Cobb Leach and Pete Toronto dodged away from the flare of light coming through the bar door. Then, they were stabbing lances of flame as they started their guns to rolling.

"Put those guns away!" came a savage yell. "Put 'em away or take the consequences. This is Stag Tellifer!"

Turk Ebaugh jerked abruptly from his daze and grabbed his guns. But Turk had neglected to get away from that fatal flare of light. He got off one shot and then he staggered as a fatal slug smashed into his brain.

There was a guttural yell of fury from Pete Toronto.

"Fight, you hell-hounds!" he roared. "This is a showdown. It's them or us! Fight!"

The rattle of guns increased. From

every black corner, viperish tongues of pale, scarlet flame lanced.

A stricken horse screamed and crashed heavily to the torn, dusty earth, throwing its rider headlong. And again came Stag Tellifer's savage yell.

"Scatter!" he ordered his men. "Don't bunch up. You make too big a target. Scatter!"

Stag Tellifer now found himself and his riders virtually in a trap in the center of the square, with a circle of hungry guns all about them. Only the velvet blackness of the night saved them from complete annihilation.

The furious riders almost rode Lake Cordell and Jack Tellifer down. And it was Jack's sharp yell of warning that saved them.

Lake still held on to Fox Steele. Lead was whining all about them, thudding dully where it dug into the earth at their feet. Then there came a muffled spat and Fox Steele sighed and melted limply down. There was no telling whether it was friend or enemy slug which had done him in.

Now, in from the south, came the smashing charge of the men who had ridden down with Lake and Jack Tellifer. Their arrival quickly and definitely changed the tide of battle. The feeling that they were hemmed in from both sides, and not knowing when another charge might strike at them from still another angle, spread panic among the outlaw gunmen.

The defending gunfire slackened as the South Camp men began scattering and fleeing into the surrounding night. Only at one point did the resistance seem to hold steady for a moment. There were four guns rolling and booming there, four guns plainly wielded by two men. And Lake Cordell knew who those two men were.

Jack Tellifer had disappeared in the confusion. So Lake, a drawn gun in each fist, moved swiftly in through the darkness toward those four guns. But before he reached them, they went abruptly silent. Lake went ahead at a run.

He halted against the dark side of a building, his senses strained and alert. Then he slid silently along the side of the building, crossed an open stretch and came up to another shack. He almost bumped into a man who was crouched there. The fellow snarled like a caged wolf, and Lake, not knowing whether it was friend or enemy, took no chances. He clubbed the fellow down with a gun barrel. And somehow, he knew that it was neither Cobb Leach nor Pete Toronto.

Where had those two gone? If they evaded the net, then his own part in the night's work had been a failure. It meant a great deal that he had enlisted the support of the better element in Cherokee Valley to clean up South Camp and that the clean-up was apparently going to be a success. But the loot from the train robbery, and that four thousand of Chuck York's—if he didn't locate that—

He circled this building and moved on to another. From back in the square he could hear the voice of Stag Tellifer shouting orders. There came a desultory shot or two from the far end of the camp. Maybe Toronto and Cobb Leach had slipped away, had gotten up there.

A sense of frustration gripped Lake. The feeling came over him that he had played his cards wrong. He should have gone in on Leach and Pete Toronto when he had them in the open in front of the liquor joint. Lake told himself in disgust that he had muffed the whole thing.

But he couldn't just stand there. He had to keep on, to try and pick up the trail of the two bandits.

Out ahead he caught a momentary flicker of light. Then all was dark again. But Lake hurried forward toward that flicker. He stopped against the dark bulk of still another shanty. But there was no further light, no sound or movement anywhere. Maybe his eyes had tricked him, he thought. Maybe he had just imagined he had seen a light.

He pressed close to the wall of the place, listening. Then he heard a rustling and the faintest echo of a heavy, guttural voice. A single flash of exultation ran through him, then he went suddenly cold and grim. Pete Toronto was in this shanty, which meant that Cobb Leach was probably there, too!

SOUNDLESSLY, Lake moved along the wall, one outstretched hand exploring ahead of him. His fingers encountered an open window, but on the inner side of the window were the heavy folds of a blanket. Lake pulled that blanket aside just a crack. A line of faint light showed.

Lake peered in cautiously. He saw

the wide, squat figure of Pete Toronto. He was holding a ready gun in one hand, a stub of guttering candle in the other. Kneeling on the floor was Cobb Leach. He had two sets of saddle bags beside him and a big battered wooden chest. He was feverishly transferring something from the chest to the saddle-bags. Lake couldn't see what that something was, but he could guess.

Lake let the blanket fall back into place. There had to be a door to the shanty. He stole along the wall and turned a corner of it. A harsh whisper met him. "That you, Fox?"

The speaker realized immediately that he had made a mistake, for he cursed savagely and the curse was drowned out by the crashing roar of a gun. Lake felt his hat lift and settle as the slug passed through it, so close that it seemed to tug at his hair.

Lake's answer was the only possible one to give. He triggered a shot just under where that gun flame had spat at him. There was a gasp, a croaking groan, then a sodden, heavy fall.

From within the shanty, came a snarl of warning. And then, not three paces from Lake, a squat, gorilla figure lunged into view. Pete Toronto seemed to possess the instincts of an animal, for he had Lake located instantly and his guns were crashing.

A slug ripped along the cartridge-filled loops of Lake's gun-belt on the left side, bruising his hip and spinning him half around. Another gouged along his left forearm, paralyzing it so that he dropped his left-hand gun. But with his right, Lake fired quickly, twice.

A hoarse, wild roar erupted from Pete Toronto's agonized throat. He stumbled around in a stricken circle, charged blindly into the wall of the shanty and fell over backwards and lay there. A hoarse rattle sounded in his throat.

Lake realized dazedly that he had kept throwing down on Toronto, but now his gun was clicking on empty cylinders. He dropped to his knees, fumbling around with his sound right hand for the gun that he had dropped from his left. His clawing fingers located it just as another figure plunged from the shanty door.

Keeping low to the ground, Lake saw that figure outlined against the stars. He could see the bulk of saddle bags hung over Cobb Leach's shoulder and the metallic gleam from the ready gun he held.

"Leach!" rasped Lake. "I want you!"

Leach's reply was a curse, and the barking snarl of the gun he held. And while Leach fired he kept running toward the sanctuary of the outer night.

Low against the ground, Lake Cordell easily avoided the lead that Leach was throwing in blind desperation. And when Lake began to shoot in return, it was with a cold, detached deliberateness. He saw Leach spin and stagger, saw the bulk of the saddle-bags vanish from his shoulder. And he heard Leach whine like a desperate animal.

Again Lake fired, with that deadly detached certainty. And then, abruptly, there was no lurching, spinning figure outlined against the stars. All the world was quiet, except for someone yelling out in the square.

It took a moment or two before the import of that yelling reached Lake's consciousness. Then he recognized the voice of young Tellifer, and Jack was calling his name anxiously. "Over here, Jack, over here!" Lake called back.

Lake got to his feet and swayed a little dizzily. His left hand and forearm were drenched in clammy wetness. He stripped off his neckerchief and was engaged in trying to put a bandage on the wound when Jack Tellifer and several others came charging up.

"Lake!" yelled Jack again. "Lake Cordell! Where are you?"

"Right here, Jack," Lake said. "Give me a hand with this damaged wing."

AS Jack reached him, Lake sat down suddenly. What a sissy he was, going all weak and shaky over a little bullet gouge along the arm! But it was good to lie back on the quiet earth and close his eyes, while Jack Tellifer, with someone else scratching matches for light, put a really secure bandage on that arm.

Somebody else put the neck of a whiskey bottle against Lake's teeth and a couple of gulps of the fiery stuff cleared the mists from his mind.

"Thanks, boys," said Lake. "I'm all right now."

"What did you run into, Lake?" demanded Jack. "What was all the shootin' about?"

"Toronto and Cobb Leach," said Lake. "I found 'em packing saddle-bags with that train hold-up loot. They were fixing

for a getaway. But they didn't. They're both out there—dead."

It was mid-morning when Lake Cordell again rode up the lone street of Custer City. Behind him, on a lead rope attached to the horn of his saddle plodded a pack horse, carrying a small, compact, tarp-covered burden. Lake's left arm was in a sling and his face was gaunt and hollow-eyed and tired looking.

As Lake pulled to a halt in front of Sheriff Bill Teachout's office, the sheriff and a stocky, square-jawed shrewd-eyed man in store clothes stepped out. Teachout stared in amazement.

"Hello, Bill," Lake said, grinning.

"Lake!" the sheriff shouted. "I was beginning to worry about you. What's wrong with your arm?"

Lake swung down, shrugging.

"A little lead trouble. You might yank the pack off that bronc. I reckon you'll find most of that train loot in the pack.

"What!" Teachout gasped. "You mean you—"

Lake walked into the office and sat down, trying clumsily with one hand to build a smoke. Bill Teachout came in lugging two canvas sacks. The stranger in store clothes was close behind.

"Here—let me," Teachout said, rapidly twisting a smoke into shape and tucking it into Lake's lips. "Lake, this is Mike O'Brien, a railroad detective."

Lake shook hands.

"Glad you're here," he said. "You can take over that stuff and maybe the railroad can get it back to its proper owners. I took out four thousand dollars, which belongs to Chuck York. The bandits took it off me during the hold-up."

O'Brien grinned. "Bill told me you were a pretty live wire, Cordell," he said. "But I hardly expected you'd make such a good job as this."

"I was lucky," Lake said. "And I had Stag Tellifer and the good folks in Cherokee Valley to help me. Bill, you'll have no more trouble with the Cherokee Valley folks."

"You mean you got old Stag Tellifer to step into line?" Bill Teachout gasped. "You're all right, Lake. You got a deputy job with me as long as I'm in office."

Lake shook his head.

"I'm giving you back your star, Bill. I got all I went after." Lake told the story of the grim battle in detail. "You want to take a ride into Cherokee, Bill, and get acquainted," he suggested. "They're fine folks—those that are left."

"What are you going to do now?" Teachout asked.

"I'm heading for the Y-Forty to give Chuck York his four thousand dollars," Lake said. "Then I'm going to sleep for a week. . . ."

BUT Lake didn't. Twenty-four hours later he was again riding down through the timber on the east side of the Buckthorns, to hit the main trail in Cherokee Valley. At a certain spot he reined in and looked about, a broad smile plying on his lips.

Right about here it was, where he had met Nan. What a lithe, spirited little beauty she was! And when he had held her in his arms, and then kissed her—

"Hello, Lake!"

His head jerked up and he stared. Nan was on foot, leading her bronc. She had just stepped out of the tongue of timber. The sun burned on her dark head and her eyes were deep and soft and shy. Warm color beat on her cheeks and a soft, brooding smile curved her red lips.

Lake swung down, walked up to her.

"I came back, Nan," he said simply. "Seems like I had to—like I couldn't help myself."

Her smile deepened.

"And why?" she asked softly.

"I reckon you're a witch—a lovely little witch. You must have put a spell on me."

She laughed gaily.

"I don't feel like a witch. I feel like a scared, mighty brash young lady. You were pretty fierce that day, Lake."

"I had to be fierce," Lake said, chuckling. "I had an armful of wildcat and I was afraid to let go."

"I didn't make much of a job, blocking the trail, did I?" Nan asked.

"You did until I kissed you, Nan."

She stared away with a musing little smile on her lips. Then she looked at him, almost defiantly. "Well, cowboy, the trail is blocked again," she said.

"You know what happened before," Lake reminded her.

"Maybe that's why I'm blocking the trail again, Lake."

"We'll see about that."

He stepped forward, took her in his arms and kissed her.

A little later she burrowed her dark head contentedly against his shoulder.

"Trail's open, Lake," she murmured.

GUNS of ROMANCE

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Thrilling Ranch Stories

"A single jump toward me and I'll start the smoke," Ring told the gunhands

A NOVEL BY CLIFF FARRELL

I

IT was legend in Angel Valley that only a man with death at his heels would ride The Devil's Griddle in late August. But the rider who was pushing his way up from the seething sink at noon had different reasons. He had crossed the Griddle because it cut a day from the journey. And he was not riding away from death. He had come to Angel Valley to deal it out.

By midafternoon he had made the long climb through Paradise Pass and had reached the cooler, greener benches of the Valley. He veered down a draw, and came out in a basin clumped with live oak. He passed a grass-grown heap of ashes that once had been a ranchhouse. Nearby was a windmill, rusty and tottering, the well dry for years.

He halted his horse beyond it in the shade of a box elder. Faintly discernible beneath the tree was the mound of a grave. And carved on the trunk, the letters nearly barked over, but still legible, was this inscription:

HERE LIE THE BONES OF
CYCLONE WILSON
TOM WILSON
RING WILSON
A FAMILY OF SKUNKS

His lips parted in a bitter laugh. Then he swung his chunky body down. He

The trail to Angel Valley led through Paradise Pass, but Ring Wilson had to cross the devil's lead-riddled Griddle on his justice journey!

drew a barlow knife from his pocket and went rapidly to work. His eyes that were normally blue, were slitted and red-rimmed now. A thick, sandy beard made his age difficult to estimate.

Soon he stepped back. He had cut away the lower of the three names, and inserted two new words in its place. The epitaph now read:

HERE LIE THE BONES OF
CYCLONE WILSON
TOM WILSON

MURDERED BY
A FAMILY OF SKUNKS

He regarded his work for a moment with grim face, then mounted and wheeled his horse for the brush-grown old ranch road which pointed northward. The town of Seven Trees was five miles in that direction.

The horse had moved only a dozen strides, when the chunky rider went tense. He started to whirl. But a sharp voice caused him to pause and go still in the saddle.

"Lift 'em feller! You're covered!"

There was desperation in the grim command of that husky voice. The chunky rider hesitated, and cast an eye warily over his shoulder. He saw the glint of guns, and the head and shoulders of a man jutting from the drooping branches of a live oak not a dozen feet away and slightly to the rear.

The bearded rider's face tightened, as though considering his chances. Then, realizing that the odds were banked too heavily against him, he lifted his arms.

"Pile down on this side," the voice commanded. "And don't burn any extra seconds doin' it. I'm impatient."

"My pockets are down to the seams, amigo," the rider said as he complied.

That was true. But he did not mention the money belt that was strapped against the lean muscles of his waist.

"It's the horse I want," the tense voice rasped. "Stand still. I'm goin' to take your hardware. Those guns might be too much temptation."

HE heard a step, and a hard gun muzzle pressed his spine. A quick hand relieved him of his brace of guns. "The horse is tired," the bearded man remarked. "He's pounded out tough miles today."

"He'll have to carry me," was the response. "There's misery on my backtrail, and too close for comfort."

The bearded man's head lifted, and his eyes suddenly flared into a seething glow. He had recognized that voice. Defying death, he turned to face his opponent, his body hardening and crouching.

The other was a straight-mouthed, hawk-faced man of possibly thirty-five, carrying now a strained, hunted look. But seven years had not changed him much.

The bearded man's lips framed the words, "Keith Starr." But he did not utter them aloud. Nor did he move as the hawk-faced one backed warily to the horse and swung aboard.

"I hope you get through," he said harshly. "You're welcome to the hoss. I want to live. I want to meet you again. The next time I aim to put a slug through your heart."

Keith Starr mounted and stared at the chunky figure with new intentness, as though memory had struck a chord from the past within him also. Then his eyes caught the freshly-cut wood on the alder tree. With an exclamation he kneed the horse to it, and leaned close to read it.

He jerked erect, and stared.

"My gosh," he exclaimed, his voice thick with sudden savage intensity. "You're not—you're not—"

"Yes, I'm Ring Wilson—one of the outfit you Starrs thought they had wiped out." The chunky man's response was like the lash of a hatred-freighted whip. "But you were wrong. The third body in the ashes of the ranch that night was some chuckliner that had stopped over."

The mounted man gave a choked curse. "You shot my father without a chance," he said. "You deserve to go the same way. But I'll give you a fair break when the time comes. That's more than you gave him."

He whirled the horse, fed steel to its flanks, and swept away. Ring Wilson stood staring, rooted by sheer, stunned surprise.

The departing rider paused across the basin, held up Ring Wilson's pair of black-handled six-shooters in plain sight, then tossed them into the grass.

"You'll need them when I come for you," he shouted back as he threw the horse into full stride again, and plunged out of sight among the trees.

RING stood there a moment, frowning over that murder accusation. He finally shrugged and strode for his guns. He glanced at the sun, and alarm sparked in his eyes. In the hectic few minutes that had just passed, his first purpose had been forced into the background.

"Five miles," he said. "I can still do it."

He hit a fast stride up the north rim of the basin.

Wh-ir! Snap!

Rifle bullets cut the air over his head. He caught the pink jets of flame and saw a racing group of riders on the flat range less than half a mile away. He jumped behind a big boulder, and saw them plunging toward his position, spreading out in a thin line, riding against the necks of their mounts in a hell-for-leather rush.

"Morgan blood in those horses, grain fed and fresh," he appraised. "Starr will need more than luck to outrun them on that tired cayuse."

They dismounted beyond six-shooter range, but not beyond sound of their profane rage. Four of them had the bearing and appearance of salty cowpunchers. Then Ring's eyes fixed on a fifth who hung back, evidently valuing his own skin above the others.

He stood out from the rest because of his clothes. His doeskin pants were thrust into tight, brown boots. His shirt was of silk, his hat cream-colored, stiff-brimmed. His single gun glinted with ivory and silver.

"Mace Fielding," Ring muttered. He remembered Fielding, rather vaguely, as a newcomer who had bought a ranch in the valley at just about the time the range war between his father's outfit and the B Star spread had broken out.

The sixth man, who seemed to be giving orders, was runty, wizened and conspicuous because of his unnatural pallor. He wore a white shirt with black sleeve bands. His brace of black-butted six-guns bulked against his diminutive body.

As his opponents encircled him, Ring was forced to shift his position. One of the punchers gained a good view of him as he did so, and threw up his rifle to fire. But he stayed the trigger, and stared for a moment. Then he gave a startled yell.

"For heaven's sake, Kelso," he bawled, "that ain't Starr. We're barkin' up the wrong tree."

The circling movement halted suddenly. Ring could see their puzzled uncertainty.

Then the man in the white shirt spoke.

"Who are you, feller? Show yourself. We're only interested in an hombre named Keith Starr. Maybe we've made a mistake."

"You're plenty right you've made a mistake," Ring howled in simulated wrath. "My name ain't Starr. Take a look, you quick-shootin' rannikins. Why didn't you make sure before openin' up on me?"

HE rose into full view. They lowered their guns in disgust. The ornately-garbed man burst into a flood of withering profanity. They came riding up to view him at close range. The little man who had been called Kelso eyed him stonily. Ring now saw a town marshal's bar pinned to the flap of Kelso's shirt pocket.

Ring eyed Mace Fielding keenly, wondering if the owner of the Lazy M ranch would remember him across the span of seven years. But Fielding's florid, beefy face carried only spiteful anger and arrogance. The freckled, thin-legged boy of eighteen who had ridden this valley in the past, was a far cry from this deep-chested, solid-standing figure, bearded and grim of eye beyond his years. No hint of recognition sparked in Fielding's eyes.

"Talk fast," Kelso ordered curtly. "What are you doin' here afoot? Who are you?"

"Well, I'm not here because I like the climate," Ring drawled, his eyes slitted and watchful. "A fella relieved me of my horse a few minutes ago. I have my sights set for a place called Seven Trees. I got business there."

Kelso's eyes swept up the mountainside and fixed on that moving speck.

"There he is, boys," he rasped, pointing. "Fog it. That horse must be tired. This drifter looks like he came across the Griddle today. You ought to run Starr down in the pass."

With a thunder of hoofs the four punchers swept away. Kelso and Fielding paused a moment and looked at Ring. Kelso appraised him with faded blue eyes that had the impersonal, flat

fixation of a cat's stare.

"You'll keep your health by stayin' clear of Seven Trees, stranger," he warned.

"Yeah?" Ring drawled, dragging tobacco and papers. "An epidemic there?"

"Uh-huh! Lead poisonin'. It's fatal to strangers that don't play with their own chips."

"Such as?" Ring queried, with elevated brows.

"Such as smart Alecs that deliberately try to sidetrack me when I'm after a fugitive from justice," Kelso explained.

"So you're the law in Seven Trees," Ring mused. "You shoulda told me instead of tryin' to stomp me on suspicion. Sort of out of your jurisdiction, ain't you?"

"I'm never out of it when wise guys turn up."

The big man broke in impatiently.

"Never mind this saddle-bum, Trig. You can take care of him later if he keeps askin' fer it. Come on. We'll git Starr. The boys are gainin' on him already."

Trig Kelso hesitated a moment, and Ring went inwardly taut, sensing the merciless murder lust that was the one living flame in this man's life. Then Kelso wheeled his horse, and the two loped away. Their powerful horses seemed immune to the heat, tireless and with unplumbed depths of endurance.

II

THE false fronts of the stores and saloons on the jagged, dusty street took on misshapen, weird forms, as Ring Wilson entered Seven Trees. They leaned at crazy angles and teetered drunkenly about. His burning eyes were fixed on the biggest building in town. That was the county building. It housed the jail—but more important to Ring, the county tax collector's office was there.

He reeled up the steps and into the splintery wooden hall that echoed vacantly to his boots in the evening quiet. To his right a man was just in the act of closing a door on whose frosted glass was painted "Tax Collector."

Ring thrust a dusty boot into the opening.

"You'll have to stay open a minute longer, pardner," he said thickly. "I've come to pay a tax bill, and I rode a long trail to get here in time."

Ike Cleghorn, the collector, blinked uncertainly with watery eyes. He was a wrinkled, bald-headed political parasite.

"What property is it?" he asked irritably.

"The old 3 W ranch," Ring told him hoarsely.

Cleghorn's face changed. He was startled, and he looked closer at Ring, consternation plain in his eyes.

Then he tried to step back and slam the door. But Ring's foot blocked it again.

"This office is closed for the night," Cleghorn squeaked excitedly. "Come back in the—"

"Mornin' will be too late," Ring rasped. The sudden savage flare in his bloodshot eyes made the bald man quail. "This is the last day I can redeem it. Seven years is what they allow in this state. And the seven years since the last taxes was paid will be up tonight. How much do I owe?"

Cleghorn backed away from him.

"I tell you—" he began desperately.

Ring impatiently pushed him into the office, kicked the door closed, and jerked a .45.

"You don't seem anxious to take the money," he growled. "Do you know me? My name is Wilson. Ring Wilson. That ranch belongs to me. Now will you open up your books? Or do I have to use some persuasion?"

Cold perspiration beaded Cleghorn's wrinkled forehead, and his cunning eyes weaved about hopefully for some means of escape. But there was none.

"You're too late," he began, a quaver in his voice, his cheeks pasty. "You can't redeem it after—"

Ring collared him and dragged him behind the wooden counter.

"Somebody was all set to buy up my place at a sheriff's sale tomorrow, eh?" he grated. "You rat, get busy before I pistol whip you within an inch of your life."

Cleghorn crumbled under the steely purpose in the haggard, drawn face of this dusty, bearded menace. He produced keys, unlocked a cabinet, and began piling out ledgers with shaking hands.

As Ring emerged from the county building with the tax receipt in his pocket the twilight seemed deeper than

it was. He unsteadily descended to the sidewalk, and headed across the street. A blurred form appeared in his path, and though he tried to avoid it, his uncertain legs carried him directly into it. A soft exclamation pierced his hazy brain. He realized that he had barged into a girl. That cleared his eyes a trifle.

With a growl of dismay he instinctively thrust out his arms and caught her in time to save her from falling. For an instant he steadied her as she found her balance again.

He was looking into wide, brown eyes set in a firm, little oval face framed by rich, curling chestnut hair. Her cheeks were softly tanned, and tiny freckles dusted her nose. She was pretty but that was not why Ring held her a moment longer, staring. He had recognized her. And the recognition was bitter to him. She was Carla Starr, sister of Keith Starr, the man he had sworn to kill.

He abruptly released her, reaching contritely for his hat. Some of the alkali from his own garb had been transferred to her neat, corded breeches and woolen blouse.

"I'm plumb, terrible sorry, miss," he began, his thick tongue stumbling, haltingly, his coated eyelids refusing to function properly as he attempted to focus his gaze on her.

She smiled a little.

"It was my fault," she said.

The smile was genuine. Even so he saw that it came wearily. And there was not the slightest hint of recognition in her face.

She was looking at him with concern.

"You're just in from the desert," she said quickly. "You're about done in. You're—"

A bigger form jammed between them suddenly, interrupting her, and pushing Ring back a pace. Ring's brain cleared entirely under the whip of quick anger. He was facing Mace Fielding now. At close range Ring saw new points to dislike—Fielding's button black eyes, for instance, his heavy, gross jowls, his arrogant mouth.

"So you did come to Seven Trees, hey?" Fielding growled. "And annoying Miss Starr already. *Vamos*, you filthy range tramp. An' keep out of Trig Kelso's way. You know what he told you."

"He's exhausted, Mace Fielding," the girl cried protestingly. "He didn't mean to bump me. He's—"

"The next time he'll know enough to watch where he's goin'," Fielding blustered.

"I had apologized before you horned in," Ring said.

"Shag it," Fielding snorted.

Ice suddenly melted the fire in Ring's eyes.

It would certainly have been a sure sign of trouble to be a man less sure of himself than Mace Fielding. But it only enraged the cattleman. He lunged forward, a beefy arm shooting out. It was his intention to knock Ring into the road. But Ring's body faded aside. Fielding plunged ahead, overbalanced.

Ring's fist came up solidly. It measured the enraged man squarely on the jaw. Fielding violently continued his forward progress. He dove headlong under the rail, landing on his face in the dust. He tried to rise, then sagged back limp and stunned. He had been knocked unconscious.

Ring turned to find the girl staring at him with warm, red color firing her cheeks, her lips parted in excitement—whether anger or admiration, he did not know. Then her expression changed. The fear came back suddenly, and in greater flood.

"Run," she warned tensely. "Leave town. Hide! He'll have you killed."

"Thanks," Ring said slowly. "But I'm stayin' whether this Fielding goes to the gun or not."

"But he will," she exclaimed. "Hurry. Oh, here they come. His riders—and Trig Kelso. Kelso will murder you. He's Mace Fielding's man. Run, I tell you."

RING glanced down the street. Aroused by the fracas, the same four, hard-bitten punchers he had seen in the hills came pouring from a saloon down the street. And farther on, a smaller, more sinister figure was hurrying up. Trig Kelso!

A horse trough was nearby. Ring headed for it casually, and started to slake his burning thirst from the spout.

"You don't think you're as good as a horse, do you?" Trig Kelso asked as he came up. He seized Ring's arm to drag him back.

Kelso had been deluded by Ring's apparent indifference. He had now placed himself within reaching distance.

It was the chance Ring had been praying for. He moved with blazing speed. Kelso was helpless almost before he knew what was taking place. Ring's long arm whipped out, coiled about Kelso's neck, squeezing off his wind and threatening to snap his spine. At the same moment Ring's other hand closed on the killer's gun arm with a bone-crushing twist that sent the weapon spinning into the street.

Mace Fielding came to at this point, lunged to his feet with a bellow, jerked his ornate gun. But Ring, handling Kelso easily, swung his prisoner up as a shield. Fielding did not dare trip the trigger. His punchers, whose numbers had now grown to eight or ten, surged forward too. But Ring's .45 streaked from its holster as he held Kelso frothing, but helpless, with one crushing arm.

"A single jump toward me and I'll start the smoke," Ring said. "And this tarantula will be the first to go under."

"You've signed your death warrant," Mace Fielding pronounced, his legs ashake with fury.

Purple dusk had deepened over Seven Trees. Ring poised behind the trough a moment, considering his course. A shoot-out would be suicide. With the odds what they were, he could not hope to face them.

His gun weaving back and forth he began backing across the road, dragging Kelso with him. As he reached the opposite sidewalk, Fielding and his men began edging forward step by step, stringing out like circling wolves aslaver for the kill.

Ring shot a glance to the rear. The gloomy bulk of a feed barn backed him up now. Instantly he whirled and sped around the corner of the building, wings on his heels.

A roaring flight of bullets sang past the corner, but an instant too late. The evening quiet was shattered by the sustained roll of gunfire. Yellow flashes flickered in the twilight, and found reflection in the windows along the street. Women screamed and men began shouting.

The town came aboil.

Ring raced along the wall of the barn and rounded the rear corner before the first of his pursuers, led by the catlike Kelso, appeared.

Bullets futilely whipped the corner of the building after he was beyond the line of fire.

"Spread out," Kelso rasped. "Some of you go 'round the other side and into the brush. Cut him off from the crick."

Ring sped through a wagon yard where drays, buckboards and dismantled freight wagons stood like skeletons. Beyond was an open-end wagon shed. He fled through it as red stabs of gunflame began painting bright smears in the gloom of the wagon yard. The outline of a two-story structure loomed against the early stars of evening. He saw a passageway between it and a flat-roofed, low building adjoining it on the left. He had no alternative but to duck into it. He saw that it led through to the street.

But then hurrying boots sounded on the duckboards of the sidewalk and he knew he was trapped.

He flattened against a wall, his teeth bared, his gun ready in his right hand, his left pulling cartridges and lining them for a fast reload.

Then he whirled, his gun rising, as a voice called softly almost in his ear, "Up here, cowboy."

THERE was a window in the wall, just level with the peak of his hat, opened but screened by a blind. The blind had been pushed aside, and he saw Carla Starr's head and face there within a foot of his startled eyes. He grasped the window-ledge and literally dove through the frame into the room while she held the blind back.

He crouched there for an instant on his knees, his gun ready, his eyes flickering about. But she was alone. The room boasted only the usual rude equipment of the average cowtown hotel. A bed, dresser, two stiff-backed chairs, an ugly green rug, cracked plaster and an oil lamp in a bracket on the wall. The lamp was lighted. "Thanks," Ring panted, rising and tip-toeing to the door. "I'm obliged a heap."

"Wait," she commanded in a fierce whisper. "You can't leave. They're sure to be watching the hotel. Do you want to be killed?"

"Well, I wouldn't enjoy it any a-tall," Ring admitted. "But I'm mighty poor company in this town."

"Have some sense," she argued. "Wait, I tell you!"

Voices of men resounded in the passageway. Booted feet pounded. Mace Fielding's deep tones dominated the others.

"He never came in here, you loco fools," Fielding was roaring.

The girl, a finger to her lips, ran to a door in the corner and opened it. It was a closet. She motioned Ring to enter. He looked at her. Then he shrugged and complied. It was an even break either way.

She closed the door and went to the window to lift the blind. Ring could hear the ensuing conversation.

"Oh, ah—howdy, Miss Starr," Fielding's voice grew suddenly oily. "Did, ah—did you see anybody in this place a while ago?"

"A dozen men might have gone through there without being seen by me," she replied, her voice steady. Ring sensed its hostility.

"Well, you'd have seen the one I mean, after the ruckus we kicked up trying to nail him," Fielding asserted.

Then he spoke angrily to his men.

"You lost him in the dark. Spread out and get him. He can't get away without a horse."

An excited, bald-headed man had been plucking frantically at Fielding's sleeve for attention. It was Cleghorn, the tax collector. In the turmoil of the past ten minutes he had been unable to find Fielding. Now he drew the cattleman aside, and babbled nervously into his ear for a moment.

Fielding's jaw dropped. His body went tense. Then a surge of livid fury colored his face.

"You didn't let him pay it, did you?" he snarled.

Cleghorn tried to back away, but Fielding's big hand closed on his coat and held him helpless.

"I—I had to," Cleghorn blurted in fear. "He was going to ki—"

With a savage curse Fielding hurled the man against a wall. He kicked him, then whirled and raised his voice.

"Get that bearded hombre! Get him! Shoot him on sight. Five hundred to the man who downs him!"

He raged about, his big fists clenching and opening, muttering as though suddenly beside himself. Trig Kelso appeared, and Fielding charged upon him.

"Trig," Fielding frothed, lowering his voice so that only the little gunman could hear, "that drifter is Ring Wilson, and he's just redeemed the 3 W ranch. We've got to find 'im. He's still got the tax receipts on him. Throw a line around this town, an' don't let him get away.

"Blast the luck. Just when we had the place sewed up, this fellow had to come back from the dead. Do you suppose—"

"That Wilson and the Starrs have hooked up ag'in us?" Kelso interpreted. "Doubt it. The girl don't know who he is. And Wilson ain't advertisin' himself to any member of the Starr family. They'd gun him in a minute. Wilson must know that they think he murdered their father. That was before my time, but the Toad told me—"

"Quiet, for gosh sake," Fielding breathed fearfully. "I'll flay the Toad alive for even telling you."

III

CARLA STARR had closed the window. She stood near the drawn blind, listening. Finally she drew a breath of relief.

"They've gone at last," she said softly. "I was beginning to fear they were suspicious. But they're starting to hunt for you in the brush again."

Ring emerged. He glided to the door and listened. His guns were in his fists, and as Carla marked the set of his face, she felt a cold tremor. Reassured, Ring placed a hand on the key, with the evident intention of leaving.

"*Gracias,*" he told her. "I owe you plenty. Maybe I can pay it back some day."

"You can't go," she exclaimed quickly. "Not now. Some of them would see you. This is your safest place until the chase dies down a little."

"It might go right tough with you if Fielding knew you was helpin' me," he observed.

Her eyes flamed. "I'd help my worst enemy if Mace Fielding was after him."

Ring smiled enigmatically. He wondered if she would stand by that statement.

He turned from the door and squatted down against a wall well out of line of the keyhole.

"Where's your brother?" he asked abruptly.

"You know him?" she exclaimed.

"I saw Fielding and Kelso chasing him," Ring parried. "What have they got against him?"

Dry sobs welled in her throat.

"Keith is in jail. Charged with a murder he didn't do. . . . Who are you?" she demanded. "I have a feelng that I have seen you somewhere before. An—an uncanny feeling."

Ring forced his face to remain impassive, but inwardly he went taut.

"I'm just a drifter," he said easily. "Now tell me about this other thing."

"You've drifted into the wrong place if you're hunting peace," she said tensely. "Angel Valley, they call it. Devil Valley would be a better name. For years all I've known is war. All my brother has done for eight years is fight. First it was the Wilsons. And then Mace Fielding."

"Who're the Wilsons?" Ring put in indifferently.

"They once operated the 3 W ranch south of town," she began wearily. "We were neighbors—friends. Cyclone Wilson and my father, who was called Mustang Starr, were first to pioneer with cattle in this valley. Our spreads worked side by side for years. Then came trouble. The Wilsons changed. They wanted to hog the range. They started a range war.

"It dragged along for a year. Then one night the youngest Wilson—Ring was his name—murdered my father. He killed him with a shot through a window while we were at supper. Dad's body fell in my lap. Keith and the riders went to the gun then. That same night they wiped the Wilsons out of existence and burned their spread."

SHE paused, staring dry-eyed at a blank wall, pain on her face. "Then Mace Fielding began on us," she went on. "He had been in the valley only a year. Suddenly he began to grow, and crowd us. He's fought us ever since. He's taken up every other ranch in the valley, and no doubt will buy up the old 3 W, which will be sold for taxes.

"We haven't the money to outbid him. Fielding wants the whole valley. He's greedy, grasping, merciless. He has rustled us blind, burned off our range in summer, cut our drift fences in winter, scared off our riders. His main brand is the Lazy M, and he has four riders to our one.

"But Keith learned to fight fire with fire. He collected three loyal punchers who have stood with him. He broke up the rustling, hung four cow thieves. Our brand began to build up again. Fielding quit fighting us in the open then. He tried to buy us out—at a ridiculous price. Keith booted him off the place.

"Then he tried to grow friendly with us—well, with me. He put himself in my path continually. I couldn't even ride our own range alone. I didn't tell Keith, but he learned about it. He confronted Fielding in town, knocked him down, and told him that he would kill him if he ever annoyed me again."

"And Fielding had to wait until today when your brother was in an iron cage afore he dared try it again," Ring surmised.

"Exactly," she said with a wan smile. "Well, it was after Keith's warning to Fielding that Trig Kelso came to Angel Valley. Fielding brought him. Kelso is only a machine, a slave of dope. He kills without mercy."

A heavy step sounded at the door, and there was a knock. Ring arose silently, snaking out his guns. He nodded at the girl.

"Who is it?" she called, holding her voice steady.

"It's Mace—Mace Fielding," the cattleman's heavy voice sounded. "I've got somethin' important to tell you, Carla. It's about your brother. He's in danger."

Color left the girl's face. Ring glided across the room and slipped into the closet.

"Talk natural," he breathed as he pulled the door so that it remained slightly ajar.

She hesitated a moment, then with set lips she unlocked the door and turned the knob. Fielding pushed it open abruptly, and she stepped back with a gasp. Fielding was not alone. Trig Kelso, moving with catlike silence, was at his side.

And in the hallway she caught sight of two more gunmen, standing in the shadows.

Faintness came over her, but she fought it off with all her will. She read the truth in their faces. They knew that the bearded fugitive was in this room, and they had come to take him.

Fielding glanced uneasily about, marking the closet as the probable hid-

ing place, and carefully allowed Kelso to stand between himself and the danger point.

"Good evenin', Carla," he said. "You don't seem very glad to see me."

"What about my brother?" she asked tensely.

FIELDING waved a deprecating hand. "That can wait till later. I had a fear you wouldn't open the door unless I promised some news of your brother. The fact is, I've learned somethin' else that'll interest you. It's about that drifter that Kelso has been huntin'—the one who started the trouble at dusk."

"What about him?" she asked indifferently. "Weren't a dozen of you enough to find him? Or are your hired gunmen afraid to get too close to him?"

"We thought you'd be interested in knowin' who he is," Fielding said, a rasp of fury in his voice. "That man's name is Wilson," Fielding spat triumphantly. "Ring Wilson. He's the man who murdered your own father seven years ago."

Carla Starr stood transfixed, staring at Mace Fielding with horror growing in her eyes. She began to sway a trifle, then steeled herself.

"I knew I had seen him somewhere before," she whispered.

Before she had finished speaking the closet door burst open, a human battering ram came out like a rocket. Trig Kelso had been caught napping for once in his life. He had not expected the revelation to come so quickly.

His hands jerked out his guns with the speed of magic. But even so, Ring Wilson was faster. His shoulder struck the wizened little gunman and drove him against a wall.

Fielding gave a gurgle of alarm, leaped ponderously for the door, clawing frantically at his gun in the hope of escaping. But a steely arm closed on his shoulder. He was jerked back and sent spinning across the room where he sprawled on his back.

Ring regained his balance instantly and took a stride in the hall. He paused an instant to flash the girl a grim look.

"They're wrong," he began. "I never—"

Crash! A charging body leaped astride his back, smashing him to the floor. One of the gunmen in the hall had tackled him from the rear.

Ring squirmed around like a man possessed, and came to his knees, breaking one gun arm free. He whirled the gun overhand to buffalo this opponent that he had not expected.

Like an avalanche the second man in the hall landed on him. Ring's arms were pinned to his sides. Still he fought, and the pair of them had their hands full. Then Trig Kelso and Mace Fielding charged into the fight. More gunmen came pounding in from the lobby. After a time the panting group fell back.

Kelso had slipped handcuffs on Ring's wrists. Ring came wearily to his feet, his lungs sobbing for air. He glanced around the circle, and his eyes settled on the pallid girl, who stood in the doorway of the room. Then he looked at Fielding and Kelso. He spoke, his voice laboring, but with no fear in it.

"I had two names on my list when I came down from Paradise Pass this afternoon," he grated. "I'm addin' two more to it now. One of the names is off it."

IV

THE sidewalks and saloon fronts of Seven Trees seemed strangely deserted on this early, warm evening, as they took Ring down to the county building and around to the side where the jail entrance was. They had searched him and the girl's room without finding the tax receipt.

Ring steeled himself for a bullet in the back once they had left the street. But it did not come. He was taken into the cell room. Kelso and a jailer pushed him into one of the cages, and clanged the door. Then they left him, after removing the handcuffs.

A kerosene lamp with a sooty chimney and a dull reflector burned overhead. Ring realized that another prisoner, in the cell opposite his own, was standing at the bars staring at him.

It was Keith Starr. The four other cells in the place were empty. These two were the sole occupants of the jail.

"Ring Wilson," Starr exclaimed in surprise, the animosity returning to his face. "What are you in here for?"

Ring smiled grimly and felt a bruised jaw where some gunman had slugged him.

"General misbehavior," he said ironically. "I'm being accused of murder.

Worse than that, I made Mace Fieldin' an' Trig Kelso look plumb ridiculous tonight."

Starr was silent a moment.

"A nice dish," he mused bitterly. "You and me ready to gun each other on sight. And now we're both due to be rubbed out by a pair of snakes that I hate worse'n I despise you, Wilson."

"Just how did you pin your father's killin' on me?" Ring asked, with what seemed idle curiosity.

"It was your rifle that told the story," Starr said harshly. "Nobody in the valley had another Savage .303. The instant we heard that whiplash report, and the buzz of that slug, we knew it was you that did it, Wilson. We picked up the trail of your horse and followed it back to the 3 W that night."

"So without any further investigation, you jumped us, killed Dad an' Tommy, an' that saddle bum, and burned the place down," Ring said bitterly. "I was there, all right. I had a slug in me, too. But there was a cave under the house that Tommy an' me had built when we was kids. I crawled into it with a shovel, forted myself in against the fire, and dug myself out at daybreak. I was blamed near dead.

"I got out of the Valley, and went deep into Texas. I made a stake there poppin' cattle out o' the pear thickets below the Nueces. Ten dollars a head, an' I broke a leg twice in one year. I didn't keep count of broken ribs. That's hard cow work, ropin' them snorters in the thorn country.

"But I saved my dinero, an' come back. Tonight I redeemed the old 3 W at the tax office."

"What did you expect us to do after a cowardly murder like that?" Starr shot back fiercely.

Ring changed the subject.

"Who did you murder?" he asked cynically. "I reckon you was framed, hey? Tell your yarn. I got plenty of time to listen."

Starr looked at him frowningly, as though some disturbing thought had struck him.

"I *will* tell you. Fielding has been squeezin' the B Star fer—"

"I know all about that," Ring said hurriedly, keening his ears to a sound that had lifted in the town. It was the tramp of booted feet. "Your sister told me. She was getting to the story of the killin' when Fielding moved in on us."

"My sister?" Star cried. "Carla? Where is she? Why doesn't she come to see me?"

"Fielding won't let her, maybe," Ring said grimly. "Yes, I saw her. That's why I'm here. But hustle. I'm curious about the killin'. Make it short. It sounds like visitors are on their way."

STARR stared a moment. He heard the sounds, too. But if he comprehended their significance, he gave no sign. "A year ago Fielding got short of money for some reason, and took in a partner," he said hurriedly. "That was Jim Miller, an Arizonan. Miller proved to be a decent cattleman who opposed Fielding's war on us. Miller an' me became somewhat friendly.

"Early this mornin' I went to Topaz Canyon to meet Miller in the hope of settlin' a waterhole dispute peacefully. We met in the canyon and were tongue-wranglin'. A rifle cracked from the rim. Miller went down, a bullet through his skull. I jerked my six and shook a slug at the spot. The range was too great for a revolver. I hit for the canyonside, with the idea of heading the dry-gulcher.

"I sight Trig Kelso waitin' on the rim. I also spot four of Kelso's gun peelers sweepin' down the canyon to cut me off below. I savvy that I'm in a frame. I have a path open so I take it, break through and light a shuck for the Griddle. But a spent rifle bullet gets my horse. It carried me to within half a mile of where I took your cayuse."

The thudding boots had now reached the outside of the jail.

"A reception committee callin' on us," Ring observed. "I wonder which they want. So you was framed. What other evidence have they got against you?"

Keith laughed bitterly. "Fielding didn't overlook any bets. Miller was killed by a .44 which is the caliber of my gun. It was fired from a rifle of that bore, you savvy? And then there's the Toad."

"The Toad?" Ring questioned. "Is he still alive?"

He remembered the Toad, a dwarfed, deformed creature who had come into the valley with Mace Fielding. Crippled of mind and body, the Toad had quickly grown to be abhorred because of his habit of trailing people, slinking along

behind them for no reason.

"Only the good die young," Starr said bitterly. "The Toad is ready to testify that he actually saw me shoot Miller. Fielding has a cinch against me."

Loud voices arose at the door of the jail. They could hear a turnkey blustering and threatening, but he was only bluffing for the sake of effect. The two prisoners could sense that. He was quickly drowned out by a deep rumble of menacing voices. Then high heels pounded the floor of the office.

"We want Starr, the dirty murderer," a voice howled above the others. "Give us them keys afore we git rough with you, fella. We mean business. We're going to string him up."

Ring saw that Starr seemed unmoved, cool in the face of impending death.

"Did it ever occur to you that if Fielding was smart enough to frame you, maybe he framed other folks too?" Ring said hurriedly.

"What do you mean, Wilson?"

"This is what I mean. Fielding is out to hog this whole valley, ain't he? He just about had the 3 W in his palm, after waitin' seven years. He got you and your sister where he wants you.

"Think back, man. We lived in peace until Fielding came into Angel Valley. Right after he came, we went at each other's throats. Us Wilsons found a lot of our prime beef had been worked over into your B Star brand. That started it. Then what happened?"

"We figured you Wilsons did that brand blottin' yourselves as a trigger for startin' war on us," Starr said confusedly.

THE big iron key grated in the heavy door of the cell room. It burst open, and a dozen men, indifferently masked with neckerchiefs, came charging in, roaring for blood.

"There he is!" one bellowed as they swarmed the cell holding Keith.

Ring tried to pierce the tumult with his voice.

"Starr! Keith Starr! That Savage rifle of mine was—"

But it was hopeless. The jail shook to the roaring voice of the mob. Ring's words were drowned out.

A big, chap-clad gunman, his whiskery face swathed in a red bandana, had a heavy crowbar.

"Stand back, boys," he bellowed. "We got to make this look good. Don't use the keys. There's an election comin' up. We'll bust it open, and then they can't blame the sheriff. Them bars ain't so strong."

R-rip! Crash!

The crowbar broke the rusty old bars around the lock, and the door of Keith Starr's cell was jerked open.

As they dragged him out with a howl of triumph, he fought them off for a moment with his fists and turned his face toward Ring. He was shouting something, but the words were drowned out in the uproar. Then they overwhelmed him, and surged out of the jail into the street.

Ring cursed in agony. He tore at the bars of the cell with his bare hands, but that was futile. His desperate eyes fell upon the crowbar.

It had been dropped by the lynchers, and lay on the stone floor just outside his cell.

He knelt and clawed for it. His fingertips barely reached the end of it. Cold sweat flooded his forehead. He strained against the bars, stretching frantically. But he succeeded only in rolling it an inch—farther out of his reach.

He leaped up desperately, tore off his belt, and built a loop with the buckle as a hondo. With that he spent what seemed hours, though it was only seconds, endeavoring to toss it around the heavy iron bar.

Finally with a low, panting exclamation, he succeeded. He drew the crowbar into his cell, got up and placed it for leverage against the bars supporting the heavy square of the lock. He braced a leg against the wall. His shoulder muscles swelled, and the veins bulged in his neck and on his forehead.

The bars slowly bent. With a crash they parted, and the lock dangled free.

Ring hurled the door open and leaped for the office. A thick-faced, startled man appeared in front of him. The jailer. He was jerking a six-shooter. But Ring's fist caught him a terrific smash squarely in the face. Crimson gore spurted, and the jailer went flying back against the counter.

Ring paused only long enough to take his gun, then tore into the street. He was in time to see the mass of lynchers swing past the corner of the hotel into

a vacant lot where the bulk of a big oak tree loomed against the stars.

The east wall of the two-story hotel commanded the scene of the lynching. Ring crossed the street and sped down the deserted sidewalk into the lobby. It also was unoccupied. The citizens of Seven Trees seemed to have gone into hiding.

Ring believed that from a window on the east side he might have a chance to break up the lynching. He headed for the wooden stairway, moving on his toes, for there was a chance that he might encounter an enemy here. His caution paid dividends.

He paused suddenly on the stairs. He could see down the hallway at the rear of the lobby. Mace Fielding and Carla Starr were hurrying across the hall into an east room. The girl was white as death, and sobbing.

The roar of the mob sounded louder.

V

AS Carla Starr watched Kelso and his gunmen take Keith Starr out, she suddenly came to the verge of collapse. She sank numbly in a chair, and hardly knew that Fielding was still there until he spoke.

"Do you hear me?" Fielding growled impatiently.

"What do you want?" she asked.

His eyes took on a savage glint. "Nothing much," he said, "except that lynchers are on the prowl. They aim to string up your brother tonight. I was afraid of it. If you had listened to me this afternoon, your brother would have been out of jail by now."

"You're lying, as usual," she said bitterly. "If there's any lynching done your toughs will do it, Mace Fielding, and you know it."

Fielding thrust thumbs into his cartridge belt and attempted to look hurt.

"It isn't my fight," he whined. "I'm trying to save your brother—because of you. I like you, Carla."

Her anger came to raging overflow.

"Get out!" she choked. "Get out, you slimy worm. Get out of this room before I kill you."

But he stood unmoved. He raised a thick hand suddenly for silence.

"Listen," he said. "Listen, you silly fool. Hear 'em?"

A sinister murmur was making itself apparent, and rolling louder. Like the buzz of a rattler, once heard, it was forever unmistakable. The killing cry of humans, the voice of a lynch mob.

With a low cry Carla rushed across the corridor into a room that overlooked a vacant lot adjoining the hotel. Though an oil lamp was lighted, the room was unoccupied. She sped to the single window.

Under the big oak in the center of the lot, citizens of Seven Trees usually loafed in the evening, pitched horseshoes and gossiped. But now a dark tide of men was surging in from the street, heading for the tree. Someone carried a flaring torch of pitch pine. Carla saw that they were thinly disguised with neckerchiefs drawn up to their eyes. But she knew them as Lazy M riders, with a sprinkling of town toughs.

Hurrying along in their midst was Keith Starr, his arms bound, a noose already loosely about his neck. His face was pale, but he walked on steady legs. In the background hovered a small, white-shirted figure—Trig Kelso.

Carla swayed, horror numbing her as she stared in blinding fear at her brother, who marched with firm step to his death.

"Stop them! Stop them!" she moaned, her voice faint and faraway, though she had wanted to scream the words.

"It ain't too late yet," Fielding remarked coldly. "Kelso knows I'm here. A signal from me, and he'll break up that mob. But we have to meet his price."

She whirled on him.

"What is it? What do you want? My half of the ranch again? You—you—"

"I want to help you," Fielding said icily. "Sign over your interest in the B Star to me, and I'll be able to see that Kelso is paid for savin' your brother."

FIELDING, lighting a cigar, was merciless. His venomous intention was written upon him. He would go through with the lynching.

She turned and stared out tensely. The rope was snaking over a tree limb. Her brother was being lifted to a barrel beneath it.

"I'll sign," she said faintly. "I suppose you have the papers ready. You wouldn't overlook that detail, would you?"

"Right," he grated. "An' don't think it ain't legal."

Carla, her body atremble, rushed to a stand upon which Fielding tossed a legal document. A pen and ink stood ready for use. Fielding had indeed overlooked no detail.

"I'll sign," she said wearily. "But if they lynch my brother, I'll kill you with my own hands, Fielding. I'll sign."

"No, not now, nor ever," a brittle voice interrupted. A hand, bronzed and powerful, seized the pen from her and broke it.

Fielding felt the hungry bore of a gun jammed into his back. Ring Wilson's hand was holding it, his thumb twitching on the hammer, the urge to kill, powerfully upon him.

"Y-you!" Fielding gurgled, his triumph suddenly evaporating under the glow of eyes that seemed to punch holes in him.

"Amble to the window and tell your hired stranglers that the show is over," Ring ordered.

"What if I don't?" Fielding challenged, his voice thin.

"I only wish you would give me an excuse to pull this trigger," Ring told him.

"Wait! Stop! I'll do it," Fielding blurted out in horror. "Get away from me."

"Quick," Ring snapped, shoving him to the window, "yuh've run out your string, Fielding. You're not goin' to hang Starr, legally or any other way."

Ring crouched out of sight, his gun pressing the cringing schemer's ribs as Fielding pushed his head through the window.

"Let him go, boys," Fielding bawled hoarsely. "Trig, it's all off. Stop them. Untie him."

Trig Kelso darted into the mob. There was a swirl of movement. Then someone removed the rope from Keith Starr's neck, another cut his arm free. The masked men melted away, leaving only the dazed cowboy standing there on the barrel, not yet fully comprehending that death had lifted its hand from his shoulder.

STARR stepped down uncertainly. Reason now told him that his sister must have had a hand in his release. Another thought caused his blood to run cold, and he ran toward the hotel, staring up at the window, which was now blank and vacant again.

"Carla," he shouted frenziedly. "Carla! Are you there? Are you all right? Carla!"

"Answer him," Ring whispered. "Tell him to get horses, an' hustle. We've got to run for it. Trig Kelso knows something has gone wrong. It wasn't part of the plan to turn your brother loose."

The girl stared at him in helpless bewilderment. Then she sped to the window, leaned out and whispered tensely to her brother.

In a moment Starr whirled, and with long strides headed away. From the shadows, three chap-clad, range-hardened men, braces of guns in their hands, fell in step with him. He greeted them with an exclamation of elation.

"We was ready to begin smokin' up them cussed stranglers when Fieldin' ended the party," one drawled, passing weighted gunbelts to Keith. "We wasn't aimin' on lettin' 'em stretch your neck no further, feller, You look too much like a turkey as it is."

"I can't figger Mace Fielding savin' you, Keith," another said.

"I can't savvy it neither," Starr admitted as they raced to a nearby corral for horses.

In the room Carla, shaking with mingled relief and reaction, backed away from Ring. Fielding stood, hands raised, his face vicious with fury. Ring was listening for sounds.

"You—" the girl began. "Keith owes his life to you. But he'll kill you when he learns who you are."

Ring lifted a hand for silence. Faint movements were sounding in the hallway. Trig Kelso was coming, and bringing some of his gunmen.

Kelso had grown suspicious as Ring had anticipated. Abruptly he shifted his gun to his left hand. Before Fielding realized what was coming, Ring stepped forward, his fist crashing solidly to the big man's solar plexus. He caught the pain-paralyzed trickster's body as it doubled, and lowered it to the floor. No alarming noise had been made, and Fielding could now offer no resistance while Ring lowered the girl from the window.

"Not a sound," Ring breathed. He picked her up bodily and carried her to the window, dropping her to the ground.

Then came a tap on the door.

"Everything in order, Fielding?" Trig Kelso's dry voice called.

Ring swung his legs over the sill. He heard Kelso give a tense order. Then a heavy body rammed the door, bursting off the flimsy lock.

Ring's body vanished, but not until Kelso caught a glimpse of it. The gunman demonstrated his speed then. His first bullet whistled through the open window barely an eyelash too late. "Run," Ring snapped, seizing the girl's wrist.

VI

THEY raced toward the street for they did not know where Keith had gone. Ring looked back and saw Kelso's head emerge from the window.

Without missing a stride Ring fired a snap shot. The frame splintered and drove slivers around Kelso. The gunman ducked back instinctively. He had finally met a man who was his match with a gun.

Kelso chanced a glance a moment later and an orange blade of fire whipped from his gun. The bullet drew blood from Ring's earlobe. He whirled and fired a second shot. The glass in the double sash above Kelso crashed down about him, driving him back to cover again. A moment later he fired again, but Ring was swerving into the street now.

He hit stride with the excited girl. Then his eyes lighted with satisfaction.

"Here come the horses," he told them.

Four riders leading two extra mounts came plunging down the street through bands of yellow light from store windows. Seven Trees had gone to cover. Except for Ring and the B Star people, the street was deserted.

With a rush of dust, the horses drew up in front of the hotel. But Ring heard feet pounding on the wooden stairs inside. He whirled, his gun ready. Kelso and the gunnies were racing down to stop them.

Keith Starr heard them too. He leaped from the saddle to the porch. Active as a wildcat, he gave two strides, his uninjured fist coming up. Perfectly timed, it met Kelso with a sickening smash, squarely in the center of his wizened face as he came charging from the door. It hurled him senseless back against the others.

"At the door is the deadline," Starr shouted, crouching, gun in his hand. "Pile that horse, Carla. Hustle."

Ring turned and helped the girl aboard a mount. He swung up.

Starr turned and leaped back into the saddle. Then the six were clattering away into the darkness, the horses' hoofs drumming a mad rhythm, riders crouching low and peering back.

The three punchers were looking curiously at Ring, but Keith Starr's grim silence seemed to discourage questions.

"Kelso is bound to organize and dog us," Ring remarked. "We've got to pick a place for a stand."

"We better swing acrost country to our own spread," Keith Starr decided. "We can fort up there."

"I'd say the Lazy M is as good a bet as any," Ring pointed out. "Let Fielding shoot up his own layout. It's goin' to be a shoot-out, don't make any mistake about that."

"Right," Starr approved. "He won't be so likely ready to burn us out, if it's his own ranch he's touchin' off. There won't be any riders at the Lazy M to bother us when we pull in. Fielding had his whole pack in town."

Carla was watching Ring Wilson apprehensively. She moved her horse nearer him and found a chance to whisper.

"I'll give you your chance to drift away in the darkness," she said tensely. "Then I'll tell Keith who you are."

"I think I'll stick with the bunch," Ring said grimly. "Your brother knows who I am."

Before she could recover from that surprise, Keith Starr had moved back with them. He peered intently at Ring.

"What's it to be, Wilson?" he asked hesitantly. "Peace or war?"

Ring smiled tightly. "I'll let you call the turn."

STARR removed his hat and rubbed sweat from his forehead. "I wish I knew," he muttered. "I been doin' some tall thinkin'. Maybe we was blind. Maybe Fielding worked us into fightin' each other. It coulda been done. But that rifle. It was your gun that killed our father."

"That .303 was missing from our ranch that night," Ring said simply. "I needed it when your wild-eyed hombres jumped us and wiped us out. Somebody stole it from the house while we was

out workin' the range that day."

"If that's true," Starr said "then we didn't have an excuse for killin' your father and brother."

"That's done and can't be undone," Ring said hoarsely. "All I want now is to get the man that really caused it."

"I more than half believe you," Starr said shakily.

"And I do believe you," Carla Starr spoke up, her voice quivering. "It is all so plain. It was Fielding that put the Starrs and the Wilsons at each other's throats. And he stood by waiting to leap on the one that survived."

They rode on in silence, each held by a black mood of regret, the realization of ghastly mistakes of the past rising like grisly specters to appall them. Carla, weeping softly, soon regained command of herself. Instinctively she drew nearer to Ring, and they galloped along stirrup to stirrup. Ring watched her as they breasted the night with drumming hoofs, and some of the pain died from his heart.

Then one of the punchers who answered to the name of Cloudy raised an arm and pointed ahead.

"There's the *jacal*, folks," he drawled. "The Lazy M. I never been invited for a visit to this spread before."

"You'll be well entertained," Keith Starr predicted.

Ring could see, far ahead, a faint dot of light from a ranchhouse window. Was it a beacon of hope, or an invitation to death for all of them?

As the corrals, dipping chutes and spread of buildings took vague form ahead, Slim Winters, the third puncher, who had been acting as rear guard, came pounding up to join the main party.

"The dance is goin' to get under way right immediate," he announced with a jerk of his head rearward. "The fiddlers are foggin' it down our dust less than a mile behind us. I sighted 'em against a skyline. Looks like a cavalry charge."

"Fielding has rounded up every gun on his payroll," Starr predicted grimly.

"Dawgone it, I betcha some of them gents is plenty rough customers, too," mourned Hoopy. But at the same time he was twirling the cylinder of his six-shooter, an anticipatory gleam in his eyes.

Five minutes later they pounded into the Lazy M ranchyard. It was a big layout, Ring noted. Mace Fielding had built up considerably in eight years.

"Somebody's home," Ring muttered, riding near the door of the squatty, log headquarters building from which a light gleamed. He swung down from the saddle.

As he did so, Cloudy yipped a shrill, sudden warning, Ring whirled, ripping out his right gun with a flirt of his wrist.

The front door of the ranchhouse, ten yards away, had been thrown suddenly open. The light from the big lamp streamed out in a yellow square. A hideous, squat shadow, misshapen and inhuman in form, bulked in the doorway. Ring stood frozen for an instant, staring at the toadlike silhouette. Then he realized that the figure had a leveled rifle at its twisted shoulder, and was ready to fire.

"The Toad!" Starr shouted. "Look out, Wilson! He's goin' to blast you!"

Ring had no choice. At that range the rifle could not miss. He flipped the hammer of his gun instantly.

THE Toad jerked convulsively. The rifle cracked with a peculiar sharp twang that was like the snap of a whiplash. The bullet sang shrilly into the sky. The Toad staggered clumsily back, then fell squirming on the floor, as though skewered down by the bullet that had smashed through his chest.

"Inside, everybody," Keith Starr snapped. The drum of galloping hoofs came drifting louder down the wind from the prairie. In a moment the five men and the girl were in the house. Their horses drifted away.

The Toad was still breathing, but with a fearful effort. His number was up. Ring cast a glance at the grotesque figure, then leaped to the rifle that had fallen from its clawlike hands. He straightened slowly and looked at Keith Starr.

"Do you recognize this gun, Starr?" he asked tensely. "I thought its voice was familiar."

Starr looked at it, then slowly took it from Ring to examine it more closely. His face was a study in conflicting emotions. Then he uttered a groan of bitter regret.

"A Savage .303," he said hoarsely. "The same kind of a gun that my Pa was—"

"It's my gun!" Ring remarked. "There's my initials on the plate. You can barely make 'em out. But they're there."

Starr turned and knelt beside the Toad, whose breath was beginning to rattle.

"Listen, amigo," Starr said tensely. "You're going to tally. Do one square thing afore you go over the big hill. My father was killed with this rifle seven years ago. Another man is accused of that murder. How did you get hold of this gun?"

The Toad's yellowish eyes lighted with a flare of malevolent humor.

"I—I—had the gun hid on this ranch," he gasped with pride. "I was savin' it in case I needed it agin."

"Then you killed Mustang Starr?" It was Carla who had asked the tense question.

"I—I—killed him," the Toad said with a mighty effort. "I—I stole Ring Wilson's gun, and laid a trail to the Wilson—ranch." A cracked, sardonic grin hovered on his lips. "And you fellers snuffed out the Wilsons. You fell for it."

The Toad's strength was rushing from him. Ring knelt, shouldering Keith Starr aside.

"Wait!" he said desperately. "You can clear Keith Starr in the Jim Miller killing too. Wait! Who killed Jim Miller in the canyon this mornin'?"

The Toad's lips parted again and he struggled to speak. "It was—was—"

Then his head dropped back. The Toad was dead.

VII

KEITH STARR arose, and there was misery in his eyes as he looked at Ring. Abruptly Ring extended a hand, and in silence they exchanged a powerful, understanding grip.

"I'll try to square things for what we did," Starr said unsteadily. "You got the right to kill me, Wilson."

"Here comes the hombre I aim to kill," Ring said thinly, jerking his head toward the prairie. "Fielding. He's the real murderer of Mustang Starr, Cyclone Wilson and Tommy Wilson."

They carried the body of the Toad to a corner and covered it with a blanket. The hoofbeats had suddenly paused at a distance. There was dead, brooding silence. Even the crickets had ceased their song in the willow thickets of the creek beyond the corrals.

"They're surrounding us," the girl said calmly. "I just saw a man creeping near the corral."

Ring turned to the table and blew out the lamp. Then—

A sleet of bullets splintered the front door. Glass tinkled and crashed from the window frames. Slugs hissed angrily across the room, striking sparks on the stone fireplace, ripping into furniture.

Ring had pressed the girl down flat on the floor at the first flash of a shot. The firing slackened, and his voice could be heard.

"Cloudy, you and Slim take the kitchen," he said, his voice cool. "The rest of us'll hold the front. Here's plenty of ammunition, both .45s an' .30-30s. And a couple of Winchesters an' extra .45s. Found 'em on the mantel. Grab 'em. We'll smoke Fielding over his own fire."

With a scuff of boots the men moved to their places. Ring crouched below a smashed window frame and peered out.

Throbbing silence had followed that first blast of gunfire. Evidently the attackers were waiting now for return bullets to spot their targets.

"Better come out peaceful," a voice rasped from the darkness near the corral after a minute of silence. "Or we'll come in and get you."

It was Trig Kelso speaking. He had lost his cold, impersonal way of talking. His voice reeked with seething, venomous rage.

"This is our night to receive callers," Ring told him. "We've got the music ready. Turn loose your wolf, Kelso."

"Don't palaver with 'em," boomed Mace Fielding from somewhere in the shadows. "Make a sieve out of that house, boys. Kill all of 'em."

"I'm glad to know that the big coyote is with the pack," Keith Starr's ironic voice shot back. "Got a boulder in front of you, Fieldin', or only a twelve-inch log?"

A movement at Ring's side caused him to whirl, for his nerves were strung as taut as fiddlestrings. He brushed Carla Starr's crouching figure. She had crept on hands and knees to his side in the darkness. She was clutching a .45.

"Get down," Ring breathed frenzied-

ly, hastily shouldering her away from the window sill over which he was peering. "Get d—"

S-s-zz! A bullet whickered past his head.

"I have a gun," she said defiantly, as they crouched out of line. "And I'm going to do my share."

She evaded Ring's grasp, pushed the barrel of the gun over the window sill, aimed, and fired.

THE house was surrounded now by a flickering ring of powder-flame, the flashes twinkling endlessly to the tune of a deafening, crackling uproar. The building shook to the impact of metal. Splinters and bullet slivers flew in the interior. The beseiged party hugged the floor.

After a minute of this the storm died away. Ring arose and tried to count his forces.

"Anybody hit?" he asked anxiously.

All answered except Hoopy. Hoopy would never answer. A bullet had snuffed out his life as he crouched there facing the enemy.

Ring, after a moment, carried the cowboy to a more sheltered corner and laid him gently down. Then he returned to his post. No word was said.

The last scattering shots died away. Long, dragging minutes of tense waiting followed. It was more wearing on the nerves of the defenders than had been the rain of bullets.

Ring could hear vague movement in the shadows beyond.

Suddenly, a single shot broke the silence. It was a signal. A flare of gunfire flamed around the house like a string of firecrackers exploding. At the same time there came the sound of running men swooping down on the place from all directions. The rush was on.

The ranchhouse suddenly erupted savage flame, smoke and lead in a blasting sheet that scythed through the first line of attack.

To his left Ring could hear a gun going, and knew that the girl was in action. At the front Keith Starr was splitting the darkness with fingering stabs of gunfire, firing slowly, methodically as he picked his targets.

Ring emptied his rifle at dim, zigzagging forms, and was unable to see any results. Then a six-gun in hand, he reared up to block the window.

A gunman came leaping from the darkness, teeth bared, his brace of weapons streaming fire. He melted away before a double blast from Ring's six.

But a second was there, leaping over the body of the first, firing into the window. Ring squeezed the trigger mechanically again, and this one went down too, clawing futilely at the starlight for support.

A bullet clipped Ring's shoulder, numbing his arm for an instant. A third attacker was in sight. But this one lost his nerve as he stumbled over the two bodies. He dropped flat, then began scuttling frantically away, with bullets kicking dust around him.

At the front Keith Starr, his six-shooter emptied, had smashed back a man who had tried to leap through a window. The girl was reloading nearby. The attack seemed beaten away at the front.

But things did not seem so well in the kitchen. Men were at grips there, panting and snarling. The stove went over with a crash. Ring came bounding in to take a hand.

Two men were reeling about over chairs and tables with dishware falling from shelves. From the language he knew that Cloudy was one of the combatants. In the darkness it was impossible to tell friend from foe.

But as Ring circled about, endeavoring to find an opening, the solid impact of a blow brought sudden silence.

Ring poised tensely, ready to fire.

"Dawgone, that hombre had a hard head," Cloudy's voice panted. "I bent my gun barr'l over his skull an' it didn't even slow him up. Lucky I found that stove poker or I'd have had to git real rough with him."

Ring ran to a bedroom off the kitchen, and found Slim Winters calmly sighting through the window with his gun.

Slim fired. He reared up and stared out. With a snort of disgust he turned to Ring.

"Only got him in the laig," he said apologetically. "I notched on his head, but he tripped an' fell just as I cut loose on him, cuss his clumsiness."

TWO wounded men were groaning outside the walls. The one in the kitchen whom Cloudy had accounted for, lay inert where he had fallen. He

would need no watching.

The attack had been shattered. Ring finally bellowed a request to Kelso that the two injured men be carried away. This was finally done. Ominous quiet settled.

Trig Kelso finally broke it.

"We'll git you at daybreak," he rasped.

"And the girl too," Mace Fielding's heavy voice echoed savagely. "We heard her in there. We'll rub her out with the rest of you coyotes."

"Keep your trap closed, Fielding," Kelso rasped to the surprise of the defenders. "I'm runnin' this from now on." Then the little gunman raised his metallic voice. "There's only two of you hombres that are on my list. I mean Wilson an' Starr. They're both charged with murder. In the name o' the law, I demand their surrender."

"Yeah, an' I reckon you'll let 'em be lynched in the name o' the law," Ring countered ironically.

"There'll be no hangin'," Kelso promised grimly. "I'll settle with 'em myself. Direct! Savvy?"

"You mean you aim to gun us down without botherin' about the law?" Starr shouted.

"That's it. I want you first, Starr. Then it'll be Wilson's turn. The girl an' the others I won't bother."

"Will that end the war?" Starr shot back, displaying sudden eager interest.

"As far as I'm concerned," Kelso shouted.

They heard Fielding's voice whining in protest, but could not distinguish the words. The tone indicated plainly that Fielding was not sure of himself. And a few harsh words from Kelso silenced him. Furthermore, a rumble of assent arose from the ring of men around the place.

Ring grasped the situation. So did Starr, and he came crawling to Ring's side.

"Fielding's grip is slippin'," he said with elation. "If Kelso can be shoved outa the way, Fielding's bunch o' hired killers will fade. Kelso is the high card in this deal."

"Right," Ring nodded. "The gunnies have enough of our thunder. They're more'n willing to let go of this bear's tail. They lost plenty in that last rush. They don't want to try it again."

Ring turned, with the intention of shooting through the window. But Keith Starr beat him to it.

"I'll fight yuh at daybreak, Kelso," Starr yelled. "Man to man, gun to gun, an' an even break on the draw, with no third party hornin' in."

"Keno!" Kelso rasped triumphantly. "And you'll be next, Wilson."

VIII

RING protested angrily. "You're crazy. You're too quick with your tongue. I was just goin' to—"

"To accept Kelso's offer yourself, hey?" Starr grinned. "I can kill my own snakes. I got you into this jackpot. I'll get you out."

"You've got a bum arm," Ring argued, cursing under his breath in disappointment.

"It takes only one hand to pull a trigger," Starr pointed out. Then he lapsed into stubborn silence.

And so the situation remained, without another shot fired until the first streak of gray daybreak showed over the horizon.

Then Ring went into the kitchen. He returned shortly with Cloudy and Slim Winters. Starr was sitting near a window, lost in his own brooding thoughts. He did not even glance at them as they casually approached.

At a signal from Ring they suddenly launched on him. He was pinned down helpless and amazed in an instant.

Then he comprehended.

"Blast you!" he said, struggling until his face went purple. "I know what you're up to, Ring Wilson, and I won't stand for it, so help me. Let me go."

But Cloudy had produced a rope, and quickly they bound him.

"I'm apologizin'," Ring grinned shamelessly. "Stop kickin' around or we'll have to peg you down."

Keith's eyes blazed fire and brimstone, but he was helpless. His sister thought she understood, and hovered by, smiling doubtfully.

"It's for your good," she chided him. "Trig Kelso would kill you, and you know it. Now when you come to your senses, we'll free you. We'll fight it out together."

She turned to smile at Ring. Then her elation faded, and a startled, horrified look replaced it. Ring was approaching

a window. Now he raised his voice.

"Your man will meet you on the flats east of the house right away, Kelso," Ring said. "That's a good spot because no nervous gents on either side can get close enough to get in the deal."

"Good," the killer's voice replied. "I'll be there in five minutes."

The girl rushed at Ring in a frenzy.

"You—can't," she breathed. "I didn't understand. I won't let you do it."

"Ring, for gosh sake let me go out there," her brother pleaded. "I'd never be able to live with myself if—"

Cloudy spoke up. "Use your head, Keith. Wilson is our fastest gun. It'll be an even break. It ain't a question of nerve. It's Carla. We've got to get her out of here if we can. And Wilson is our best bet."

After a moment Starr reluctantly nodded.

"You're right," he said. "Turn me loose. I won't buck."

Daylight had strengthened. Already the attackers had withdrawn from the east side where there was only open prairie.

Ring moved to an east window and thrust a leg over the sill, moving as casually as though going for a morning stroll.

The girl came to his side.

"I'll pray for you," she breathed.

Ring saw a depth of anguish in her eyes that startled him. He smiled at her, then dropped to the ground.

The remaining four in the ranchhouse stirred, drew nervous sighs. A white-shirted horseman had appeared from the creek brush half a mile away.

He went circling out into the open prairie.

It was Trig Kelso, keeping his appointment with death. He paused there, well out of range of any shot from the house, and waited the lone figure that strode steadily toward him. When only two hundred yards away Kelso dismounted, and began mincing forward on foot to meet his victim.

Ring advanced slowly. In the uncertain dawn light Kelso was fooled, and came on, a thin smile of confidence on his lips. He knew that Keith Starr was no match for him in gun speed.

They were only a hundred feet apart when Kelso recognized his opponent. He paused in mid-step.

Then Kelso stabbed for his gun. Ring's right hand flicked down at the same instant. Their guns leaped up in unison.

Three overlapping detonations roared out together, shattering the dawn silence.

One of Kelso's bullets ripped a gash in Ring's left forearm. The other snapped beneath his right arm, twitching his sleeve. His own gun arm was jerking to the recoil of his first shot. The muzzle tongued a lance of yellow death squarely on Kelso's chest.

Kelso was picked up by the slug and hurled on his back. His guns popped from his hands as he fell like a limp, rag doll. A gush of crimson stained his white shirt as he struck the ground. He tried to rise again, but the effort was too great. He sagged back wearily.

Ring approached slowly, step by step, and finally knelt at Kelso's side. Kelso was clinging to life, but his grip on it was slipping. His face seemed to have softened now. There seemed to be relief in his face, as though he was glad that life was about over for him.

"You fooled me, Wilson," he gasped. "You're plenty fast with your smoke pole."

(Turn page)

"Are you goin' to cash without exoneratin' Keith Starr of the Miller killin'?" Ring asked gently.

Kelso gazed at him, and a grim smile came to his lips. There was something in his face that recalled the dying expression of the Toad. Summoning strength, Kelso pointed to his pocket.

"Pencil," he said with an effort.

Ring found it. But there was no paper. Ring ripped a ragged section of cloth from Kelso's white shirt.

One corner of it bore a wet, red stain.

"Hold — me — up." Kelso gasped, fighting to live a minute longer.

Then he wrote, with a hand amazingly steady:

I killed Jim Miller. Starr innocent.
Trig Kelso.

"They—know—my handwritin'," Kelso wheezed. "Glad I'm goin'. Did Fielding's dirty work—because he gave me dope. When—I bucked, he'd keep the dope from me. It'd drive me—crazy. I'll see yuh—see yuh—in—in—"

And Trig Kelso was gone.

RING arose. As he did so something struck him in the back. It drove a deadly wave of inertia through his body instantly. He tried to turn, his knees buckled. He pitched forward across Kelso's body.

He vaguely realized that a rifle shot had sounded from a giant cottonwood in the creek bottom a good quarter of a mile south of him. It had been a treacherous shot, and a long one, but it had got him. He made out a movement among the branches.

Then he saw Keith Starr, rifle in hand, running from the house toward him.

Ring forced himself to his knees.

"Back—get back," he choked, for Starr would be within range of the marksman in the tree in just a moment.

Starr came racing on, and dropped to his knee beside Ring.

"The snakes! Where did they get you?"

But Ring, fighting off the numbness, reached desperately for the rifle and rose to his feet. He lined the sights rigidly on that spot where he had seen the branches move in the distant tree.

Crack! The rifle spat sharply. Ring caught a glimpse of branches sagging. Then a silk-shirted form went plunging earthward—Mace Fielding.

Then blackness engulfed Ring.

When he opened his eyes he was looking into Carla Starr's tearful face. But her tears were happy ones, for she sensed that Ring would live. The bullet had missed his lungs, leaving a clean wound that should heal with time and care.

"What happened to the war?" Ring asked curiously.

"All over," Keith Starr smiled tightly. "After Kelso and Fielding checked out, the rest of 'em fogged it. Looks like the Lazy M might become the property of the Starr and Wilson outfit, if we can borrow enough dinero to buy it from whatever heirs Fielding and Jim Miller left."

Ring smiled.

"We don't need it," he said. "Two ranches are enough." He tried to lift himself. "Say, somebody better ride to the hotel in Seven Trees. I hid that tax receipt under the carpet in Carla's room. They looked in the closet, but I had a hunch that trouble was due and I cached it before I holed up in that closet."

Keith Starr grinned and rose, motioning Cloudy and Slim Winters to follow. It was apparent that Ring and Carla wanted to be alone.

They seemed to have things to say to each other.

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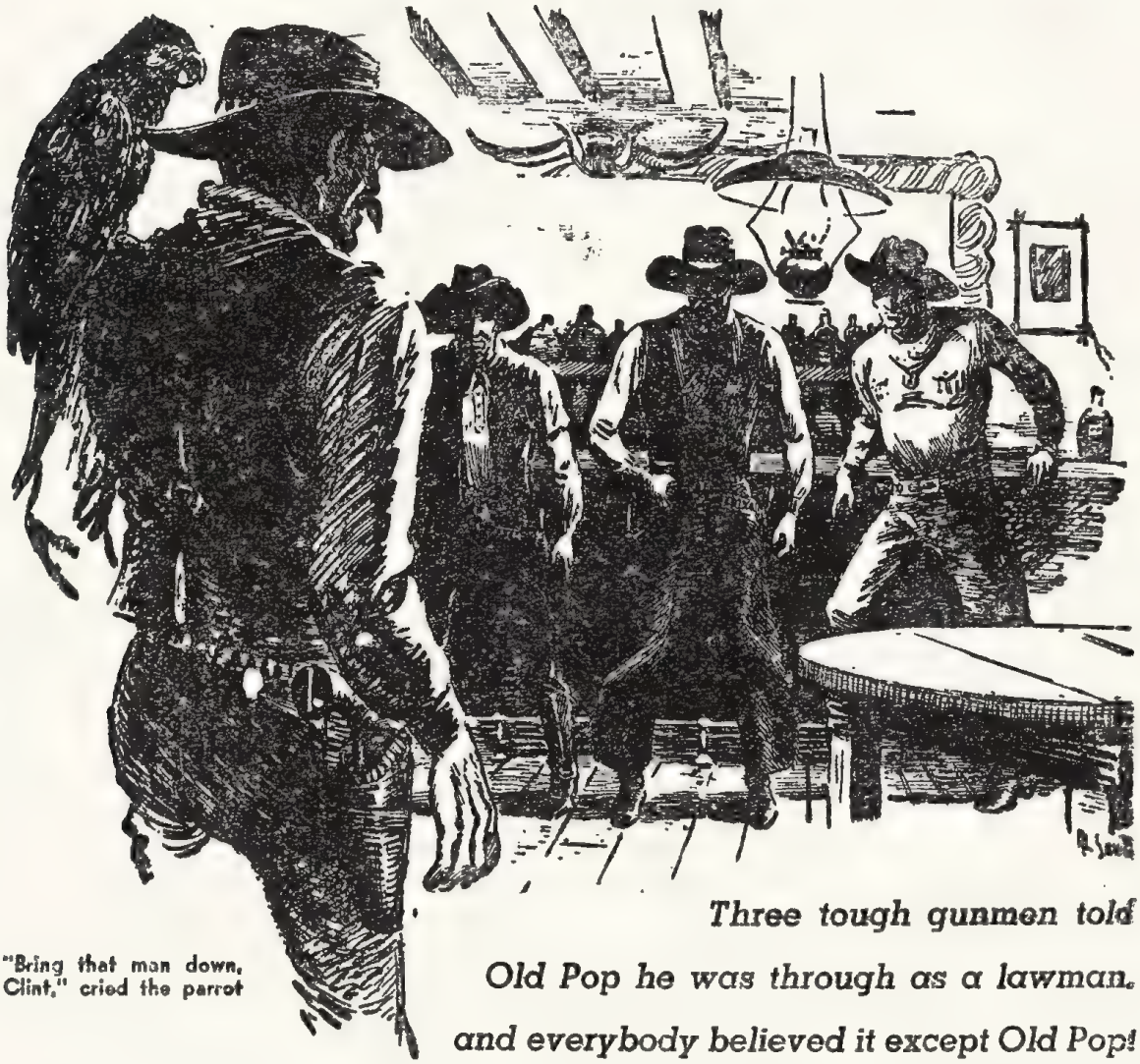


"Bring that man down, Clint," cried the parrot

Three tough gunmen told Old Pop he was through as a lawman, and everybody believed it except Old Pop!

THE legend of the raw courage and invincibility of "Pop" Clint Fisher had lived so long in the town of Grassy Springs that every man in the room was stunned into silence when young Seth Overmire challenged the graying veteran in Jock Turner's bar.

The two men faced each other across the width of the sawdust floor. There was no mistaking the fact that Seth was daring the older man to draw. Seth, a heavy set, good looking, bold faced man in his early thirties, was sided by two of his hands. Ramp Crowder, tall, bulky, sullen eyed, and Shifty Ralston, short, thin and wiry, with alert eyes and quick moving hands, pussy footed to each side of the pair when Seth made

By FRANCIS H. AMES

his call on the old marshal.

"Stick your long nose in my business, Clint," he said harshly, "and I'll shoot it off your face for you."

Clint Fisher was no drifting leather slapper. He had been a respected fixture in the town from man to boy. Rancher, one time town marshal, and, at long last, dignified elder citizen. The wild days had passed Grassy Springs by. With the closing down of the range had gone the old-timers. Homesteaders took over the land until now only Sally Minton's Diamond Bar T spread tried to hold on in the valley. But the echoes of the wild days still persisted in the town. Clint Fisher personified them and made them live with his tall tales around the cracker barrel.

The West had never known a more colorful lawman than Clint Fisher, but a man's deeds of the past need the telling by one who had seen and lived in his day. None such citizen of Grassy Springs stood on the sidelines now. They were gone with trail herds, the endless miles of open range—driven out by the plowman and the barbed-wire fence. Until now old "Pop" Fisher had strutted about the town, telling his salty tales, re-living the old days in memory. Now he was suddenly brought up short by the real thing, by Seth Overmire and his two gun hawks, who had drifted in from the south six months back.

Clint Fisher stood, back to wall, looking uncertainly around at the crowd, his eyes suddenly bewildered, while all the romance that had clung to his figure for the onlookers seemed to fade away. He was a tall, lean, weather-beaten man, with a hooked nose and a pair of drooping mustaches in which the gray stood out above the brown. On his shoulder perched a green parrot, which, according to legend had ridden there through the smoke of many a gun battle in the lawman's salty days.

The parrot peered at Overmire with bold and angry eyes.

"*Awwwwrrk*," it croaked, its raucous voice echoing in the still room. "Bring the man down, Clint."

CLINT FISHER'S eyes met unsmiling faces as they traveled about the room, until, at long last, they met those of Jackson Gillison. Gillison had not been in Grassy Springs in the old days, but he had been here long enough to become a close friend of the old marshal. He grinned at him now, a grin of friendliness, but his eyes were troubled.

"Well?" barked Overmire. "Did you hear me, Fisher?"

Fisher brought his eyes back to the taunting face of Overmire. Slowly and carefully he moved his right hand away from his gun butt—the notched forty-four butt that he had shown to admiring youngsters of the town these many years. He placed the hand on a table top and leaned against it while the parrot moved along his shoulder with the short, mincing steps of a fighting cock. The bird peered into its master's face with almost incredulous eyes.

"Bring the man down, Clint," it crooned gutturally. "Bring the man down!"

"You've run this town long enough, Clint," went on Overmire, "with a green parrot and a phony reputation. I'll run it from now on. You'll keep out of my way. Savvy?"

Fisher pushed the bird away from his face with an irritated hand.

"But, Seth," he complained, "Herb Minton's had water rights on Buffalo creek for fifty year. You can't throw up a dam and shut the water off. Sally Minton's havin' a hard enough time keepin' the old Diamond Bar T a-goin' since her father died, as it is. Without water for her alfalfa she'll not be able to carry her stock through the winter. It'll ruin her complete."

Seth Overmire, sensing the man's surrender, let the tenseness flow out of his six-foot frame and hooked a silk stitched boot heel over the bar rail. His gun hand moved up to his drink and an unholy look of triumph came over his face.

"Who says I can't?" he demanded roughly. "Not you or these sod busters, that's a cinch. I own the land above since I bought out the Clemmens place.

I'll dam Buffalo crick as soon as my scrapers come from the East."

As the younger man turned his back on the old marshal he tossed a final remark.

"If I see you sneakin' around up there, Clint, I'll—"

He left the threat hanging in the air. Clint Fisher's face reddened with the insult but he made no move toward his hip. Ramp and Shifty grinned derisively at him as they joined their boss at the bar. The room began to hum once more with sound. Low pitched conversation, the click of cue on pool ball, the tinkle of bottle on glass rim.

Jackson Gillison looked meaningly at the older man as he got to his feet and headed toward the door. Clint joined him and they went through the bat wings together, the parrot facing the rear, his cold eyes still fastened on Overmire. With them went the reputation of a man who had been known, far and wide, as the most fearless of frontier marshals. Those who had been in the room suddenly realized that they had been worshipping an idol with feet of clay. Inside the saloon Shifty Ralston's voice carried to the two men as they walked down the dim lighted street.

"If he'd had half as much sand as his parrot," he jeered, "he'd be a brave hombre."

Fisher and Gillison went straight to the Gillison's smithy, where they sat in the gathering darkness on the work bench. Both men knew that this was no idle invitation to draw by a younger man who sought to usurp the older one's reputation. Seth Overmire and his men were the real quill.

Since they had drifted into the country and had taken over the land above the Diamond Bar T, Overmire had been courting Sally Minton. He did not need the water of Buffalo creek, but he did want the girl. Sally was a pretty, vivid girl, with blond hair and dark eyes. She had refused Overmire, of that both men were sure. This dam was Overmire's desperate effort to make her knuckle under. Failing in that, it would force her to sell off breeder stock, make her blooming ranch a desert. She would have to sell out or lose everything. The Diamond Bar T, last of the old ranches would fall into Overmire's hands. Joined to his it would permit the newcomer to dominate the country.

THE homesteaders, peaceable farmers, would not mix in a cattleman's quarrel. They would not see the danger to themselves until Overmire's consolidated holding started to gobble up their few stock by rustling or other shady practices. Clint Fisher knew the breed of these men. As a friend of Sally's father from boy to man, there was an unwritten law that he must defend the daughter's interests with his life if necessary.

Jackson Gillison sensed these things, too. He knew that Overmire had challenged the only man in the valley that might stand against him. Now, after Clint had backed down in public, there would be an end to law if Overmire so willed it. The present marshal, Sid Knowles, was little more than a janitor for the town, a caretaker for the village water works. He did not even pack a six-gun. The old West had come to the new and found it not prepared.

Gillison shot a stream of tobacco juice at the forge.

"Nice evenin'," he said laconically.

"What's nice about it?" snorted Fisher, sliding down from the bench and moving toward the door.

"Don't be a fool, Clint," barked Jackson. "You ain't called upon to shoot every time some gun slick pulls the string. From what I hear you've done enough shootin' in your day."

"From what you hear," retorted Fisher bitterly. "Trouble is, my friend, that you don't know. You don't really know anything about me."

As Clint went to the door he brushed against a plow shear that lay half out of the forge. The instrument toppled into the thick dust of the floor with a dull thud.

Looking at the fallen iron Jackson Gillison could not help but compare its

almost silent tumble to the collapse of old Clint Fisher's reputation. From the forge, where heat and fire spurted at the tiny twist of the blower handle, to the cold and dead ashes on the earth. The plow shear represented the passing of the old days. Jackson Gillison had not been here to see them. He wondered now if, after all, Clint Fisher was merely another old windbag of the new West. Somehow he doubted that. His face was troubled as he moved to close up his smithy.

Clint Fisher swung wearily up on his roan and rode down the street and out over the starlit prairie. His big hands rested listlessly on the saddle horn as he allowed the horse to pick its own way to his small spread in the hills. As he rode his mind went back over the years, back to the days when he had been young and full of fire.

Grassy Springs had been a cross roads then, and men of every stripe had drifted into the town. When the tall marshal walked the streets with the green parrot perched on his shoulder, the lawless had walked and talked softly. Some had drifted on without challenging Cliff Fisher. Others, confident of their skill had crossed horns with him. Indeed, some of them were six feet under in unmarked graves on the hill, even now. Fisher's hip bone in which nestled a pellet of lead ached with the memories.

Tonight, with Seth Overmire standing before him, hand clawing over walnut, eagerness in his eyes, Clint Fisher had been well aware of the deadly threat posed by Ramp Crowder and Shifty Ralston on the side lines. It was an old trap, and one he had stepped into in the past with nerves strung taut and eyes open. There was the mark of the gun-slinger on these men, so well known to Fisher. Overmire was young, confident, dangerous and utterly ruthless.

Crowder was a run of the mill hand. The bulky man with the stolid eyes would move slowly and hesitantly in a gun mix. He'd be easily flustered, Fisher thought as he rode along, by quick shifts in the battle. Looking back, Clint knew that he'd have been utterly contemptuous of such a man a few years ago.

Shifty Ralston was a horse of another color. He was the most deadly of the three. The onlookers in the bar had not known, of course, that had Clint Fisher chosen to fight he would have swiveled and fired at Shifty first. He'd be a fast moving target once he got under way, following Overmire's lead with a ripple of lightning-like motion. Judgment of men had been what allowed a man to live in the old days.

SLOWLY the old marshal rode into his yard and stabled his horse, the homey odor of mingled hay and horse flesh a comforting thing. Then he went toward the house. A figure moved from the rose bush by the doorway. Fisher did not see it in the darkness but he sensed the motion. He spun on his heel and his hand flashed down and up, the dim starlight shining dully on the blued barrel of his forty-four.

"Who's there," he demanded gruffly, even as the click of the trigger sear came audibly to the night.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Sally Minton, "Don't shoot me for a rustler, Pop."

Clint rammed the gun back into his leather while a feeling of satisfaction came to him over the quick draw. I'm not so slow yet, he thought.

"You startled me, Sally," he said, recognizing her voice. "What in time are you doing here at this time of night? Come in while I light the lamp."

As the lamp lit up the kitchen, neat for that of a bachelor, the girl faced the man with embarrassment in her eyes. Instinctively, Clint Fisher knew that some fast rider had carried the news of the back-down of the saloon to her.

"I heard about what happened in Grassy Springs," she said, coming straight to the point, as was her way. "I rode over to tell you that I'm glad."

"Glad!" echoed Clint in astonishment. "Glad about what?"

"I'm glad, Pop," the girl said, laying a soft hand on his arm. "You showed

some sense. It's good you didn't flare up and fight. I don't want you killed, Pop. You're all I've got now that my real dad is gone."

Thinking of the ignominious role he had played, and knowing that Sally Minton knew of it, the old man flushed, getting angry to cover his confusion.

"But it isn't right, Sally!" he roared at her. "Your father's had water rights on Buffalo creek for years! In the old days I'd have fought for you!"

He subsided helplessly, glaring about the room.

"If I had been living in the old days, Pop," the girl said softly, "I'd have let you fight for me. You were young then and no one dared face you. Now it's different. I went up to Miles City and talked to a lawyer. I have riparian rights on the creek but it will take a long time and a lot of money to stop the dam by law. I'll have to let Seth go at it. I'll have to sell my two and three-year-old stuff off, and try to winter my calves on bought feed."

"Bah," snarled the oldster, "that'll ruin you, and Overmire well knows it."

"I can sell out to him," the girl said. "But he won't offer much unless—"

"Unless you marry him," blurted Fisher. "Is that the way the wind blows, Sally?"

"Yes," she said, "that's the way the wind blows, Pop.

"But," she added quickly, "don't you go to gunning my suitor down—you hear me? Maybe I want to marry the man. He's a handsome brute."

"Your Dad would turn over in his grave, Sally," Clint Fisher said, looking into her eyes, searching for the truth, "if you tied yourself and the old Diamond Bar T up with a owl hoot. That's what Seth Overmire is, girl, and mind my words."

Sally Minton tweeked Clint's ear and pecked him affectionately on the cheek.

"All I want," she said, "is to make sure you stay out of it, Pop. You keep out of Overmire's path. He and his men will gun you down at the slightest excuse."

"You better run along home, Sally," Clint said, suddenly feeling very old and tired. "An old codger like me needs some sleep."

As the hoof beats of the girl's horse faded away in the distance Clint Fisher leaned against the door jamb, his face drawn in lines of misery.

IT was the next morning that Jackson Gillison rode down while Clint was preparing his sour doughs and coffee.

"Come in, and set," greeted Clint. "Any news from town?"

"No, Clint," said Jackson easily. "Just had a job of work I wanted you to do for me. Want you to ride into Miles City with some important papers."

"Yeah," said Clint, looking at him suspiciously. "And I suppose those scrapers of Overmire's are due to arrive while I'm gone?

"You old fraud," he went on, glaring at Gillison. "Tryin' to get me out of the country while Overmire dams up Buffalo creek. Want to save me from backin' down again—showin' the yellow feather."

"No such thing," denied Gillison. "I talked to Overmire this mornin'. His scrapers won't be in until Thursday and he won't start movin' dirt until Friday.

"As today is Wednesday," he added sarcastically, "I figure you ain't so old yet that you can't ride into Miles and back by Thursday noon, if you're a mind to. Of course, if you ain't willing to do a favor for a friend I'll ask somebody else."

"Didn't say that," the oldster said hastily. "What's so all fired important about those papers?"

"Well," said Gillison, "they ain't really papers. Just a letter to a young gent just out of school. He is starting up a new fangled business of some kind in Miles City. I knew his dad real well a few years back. The gent wrote me to be sure and shoot a letter in to his youngster and give him the lay of the land so he wouldn't get hooked no way. When youngsters go in business they need a word of advice from us old hands."

"What sort of business is it, anyway," demanded Clint.

"Durned if I know," said Gillison. "All I know is that it's new fangled—kid might lose his shirt."

"For the love of Pete!" bellowed Clint Fisher. "If you don't know what sort of a business it is how in time can you advise the feller?"

"Listen, you old spell-binder," bellowed Gillison. "Are you goin' to carry this letter over to Miles for me or ain't you?"

"I'll take it," Clint said gruffly. "But I'm warnin' you I'll be back here right pert if I take a notion. Still, I ain't been in the city for some time. Might stay three-four days."

"Fine!" declared Gillison with satisfaction, swinging on his horse. "The address is on the letter."

Seth Overmire's scrapers didn't come on Thursday as Gillison had said. They came on Wednesday, the same day that Clint Fisher rode out for Miles. By Thursday noon the dam was thrown across the little Buffalo creek and a pool began to form behind the earthen embankment. Ditches were scraped by Overmire and his two men to let the water flow across the flats before it topped the dam. With this taken care of, the three men slicked up in their town clothes and rode toward Grassy Springs with smiles of satisfaction on their faces.

"That," declared Overmire, "closes the trap on Miss Smarty Minton. She'll crawl when she sees her winter feed dry up. Either I'll marry the little lady and get the Diamond Bar T for nothin', or I'll buy her out for a song. Then I'll raise you boys' wages."

The two gun slingers grinned evilly at him.

"You're a slick one, Seth," they chorused. "You'll own this valley and Grassy Springs in five years time."

"Why," boasted Seth, "should I wait that long. Once we've got the Diamond Bar T, we'll run in a few more gents from down below and it won't take long to gather in the nesters' stock, too."

THE three men had not been gone from the dam an hour when Clint Fisher rode over the rise, detouring on his way back from Miles City, to see what had been going on during his absence. When he spotted the dam he sat on his tired horse and cussed slowly, fervently, and softly beneath his whiskers. Then he rode to his shack, changed horse, picked up his beloved parrot, and headed for Grassy Springs. He swung down in front of Gillison's smithy and walked into the little place. Gillison turned from the forge to greet him.

"So," exploded Clint, "you tricked me after all! The dam's in on Buffalo creek."

A shadow passed across Gillison's face. "I know," he said, "but I didn't lie to you, Clint. Not about that. The scrapers came in a day early. What difference does it make? You couldn't do anything anyway."

"That boy of your friend's is quite a feller," Clint Fisher said, changing the subject abruptly.

"I don't know," Gillison said, looking closely into the older man's face. "I haven't seen him since he was a little tyke. Do you think he'll make a go of that business of his?"

"I don't know," Clint replied, seriously. "It's too early to tell yet. Let's amble up to Turner's for a beer. I'm drier than a road runner."

The two went up the street, walking apart, with Gillison's leather apron flapping in the breeze, and the parrot riding saucily on Clint's shoulder. They pushed into the barroom and made for a table.

"Fetch over a couple beers, will you, Turner," hailed Gillison. "Me and Clint is some thirsty."

Seth Overmire turned to hook his boot heel over the rail. "What's the matter with you two," he asked sarcastically. "Too weak to stand up to the bar like men?"

Clint Fisher had not been in town or in the saloon since the day when he had backed away from Overmire. Few people had expected to see him here again, especially with Overmire present. They

looked at him disgustedly out of the corners of their eyes.

Clint Fisher leaned back comfortably in his chair, ignoring the taunt of Overmire, burying his long nose in the beer that Turner set before him. He drained the glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he set the tumbler down.

"Nothing like a glass of cold beer," he declared, directing his remark at Overmire, "before a man talks business, is there, Seth?"

"Yeah," said Seth, winking at his two cronies, who stood beside him. "What business do you have to talk, Clint? Want to sell me that chicken coop you call a house?"

"Hardly," said Clint drily. "I just wanted to ask you how long it took you to throw that dam across Buffalo creek?"

"Three hours," replied Overmire shortly. "We don't fool around like you old-timers did. We get things done, pronto, once we start."

"I'm glad to hear that," mused Clint as he fumbled a black case slowly from his pocket and fixed steel rim spectacles on his eyes.

He rose to his feet and stepped away from the table, putting Jackson Gillison to the side.

"At that rate," he said, quite distinctly, his voice hardening down, "it'll take you three cattle rustlin' skunks just three hours more to get it out of there again."

"What?" roared Overmire, straightening up, his hand coming away from the bar. "What did you say?" he went on, as Ramp Crowder and Shifty Ralston started to pussy foot to the side as they had done before.

Clint Fisher pointed a finger at Overmire. "Listen," he said quietly, "I'm wise to your tricks, Overmire. You stand there in front of me while your two gun-hawks sneak off to the side. It's the same trick, the sheriff tells me in Miles, that you pulled on those sheepmen down in Wyoming last year. They're lookin' to hang you for that right now."

"So!" said Overmire softly. "You been up to Miles City inquirin' with the law, have you? Well, this is Montana, not Wyoming, and you won't last half as long as the two sheep-herders, Fisher."

OVERMIRE let his bold eyes flicker to his two henchmen as his hand moved cautiously toward his holster. Shifty Ralston was poised like a rattler ready to strike. Ramp Crowder was watching his boss with cautious eyes.

"That was a fair shootin' down in Wyoming," growled Overmire, showing his teeth in a sly grin, "same as this one'll be if you don't back off and crawl, old man."

"I'm warnin' you, Seth," snapped Fisher, "that I'm not backin' off this time. Start that draw, man, and I'll kill you."

"Bring the man down, Clint!" chortled the parrot. "Bring the man down! *Awwarrk!*"

The green bird suddenly crouched and dug into Clint Fisher's shoulder with it's claws, as though to secure its perch against sudden, violent movement. Instantly Fisher swiveled about, his Colt appearing in his hand as though by magic, and fired, not at Overmire, but at Shifty Ralston at the side. The slug caught the little gunman between the eyes, when his six-gun was half out of its holster, laying him, flat on his back, ten feet from where he stood.

Clint Fisher was falling to the floor, throwing himself sideways and down, even as he shot. His second bullet caught the surprised Overmire in the breast bone, even as the outlaw thumbed off a hasty shot at where the old marshal had been standing a second before. Overmire slid along the bar, his face mirroring complete astonishment, dropping his still smoking weapon, and sagged slowly to the floor.

As Clint Fisher had expected, Ramp Crowder was slow, and bewildered by the sudden shifting of the scene. His belated shot whipped the Stetson from Fisher's head as the old man struck the floor. Clint rolled over and fired at

Crowder, even as the outlaw was bringing his muzzle down in the cocking flip for a second try.

Fisher's slug struck the cylinder of Crowder's Colt, ricocheted up his arm, leaving an ugly wound, and thudded into his shoulder. The stricken man was spun about by the force of the blow. Before he could shift his weapon to the other hand, Fisher bounded from the floor, jumped closer, and laid his gun barrel along the side of his head. Crowder went down like a pole-axed steer.

"Them side-winders will never learn," growled Clint, looking around at the shambles of the room, "to quit tryin' that same old trick on me. My parrot here, scrunches down and drives her claws into my shoulder when the first gent starts to draw, front or rear.

"I reckon," he went on, speaking to Gillison, who crawled from beneath a table with sawdust on his vest, "that your friend in Miles will make a sure-enough go of that new fangled glass fittin' business of his. Never heard of anything like it; I can see as good as when I was a sprout."

"So," exclaimed Gillison, "he did talk you into gettin' spectacles, just like I told him in the letter. You had me worried for a while. I knew that you was blinder than a bat when I saw you walk into that plow shear in the forge."

"Not blind," said Clint Fisher, his eyes on the onlookers, who were now gazing at him with awe. "I could see all right, but I couldn't see clear—couldn't hardly make those side-winders out across the room when they tackled me the first time. Feller needs to see real pert when he has to make one of those triple plays, so to speak. I recall one time—back in 'Sixty-two, I think it was —when the Dillon boys come to town and started raisin' heck . . ."

THE old codger paused to look carefully about, making certain of the rapt attention of his audience.

"They plugs a gent from down Texas way, tough hombre he was, too, without givin' him a square break. I goes in after 'em. It happened, by the way, right here in this same room. They spreads out, puttin' their fastest man off to the side, same as these fellers does, while the gent in front pretends he is goin' to make the first play. 'This is the law, boys,' I sez, 'put 'em in the air.' . . ."

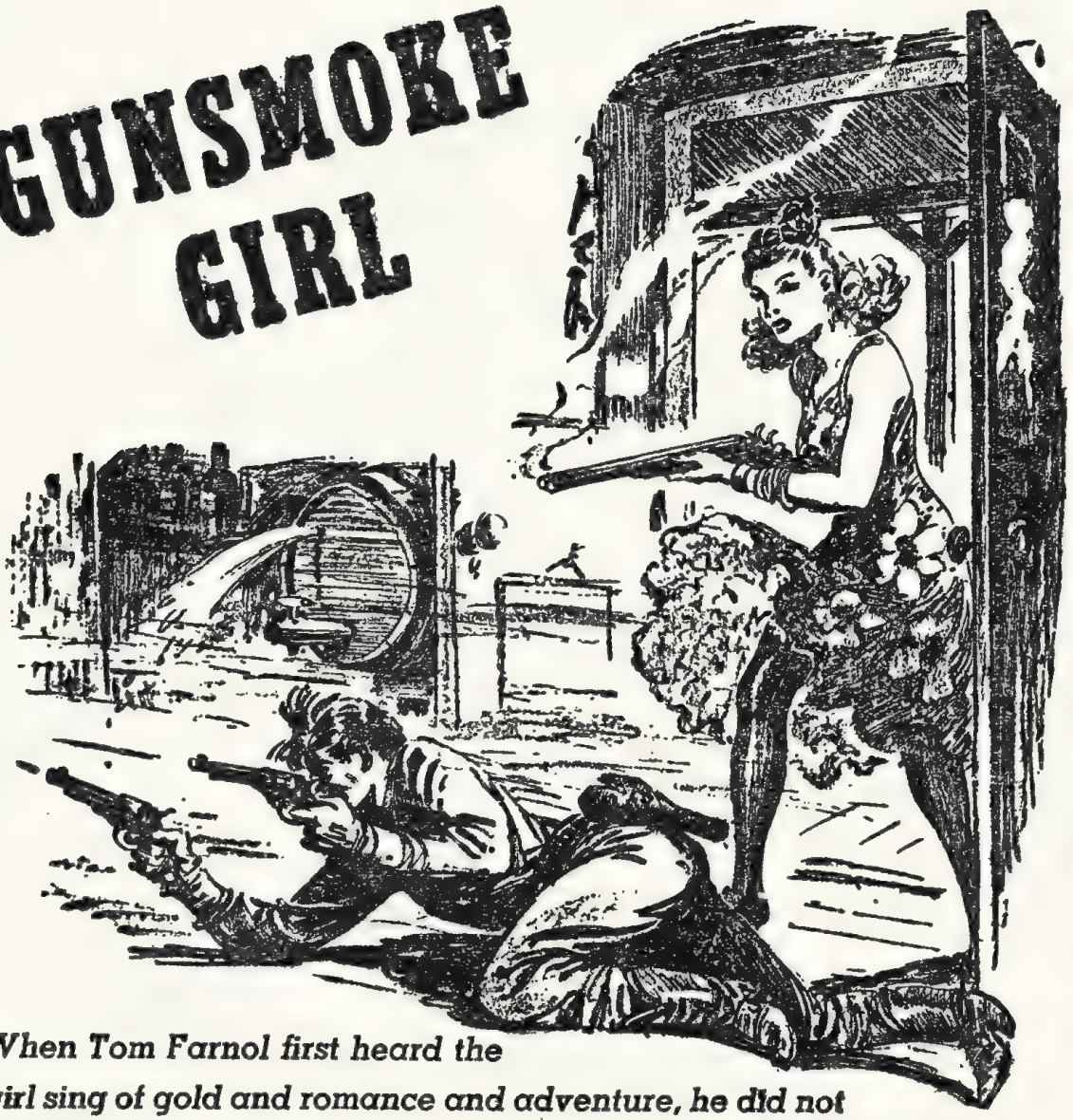
Jackson Gillison brushed the sawdust from his vest while he grinned at the old marshal. Old "Pop" Fisher was telling his tall tales again, and to a very, very attentive audience. He'd forgotten that they had to go out and pull the dam out of Sally Minton's water way. Gillison hoped that he would be telling his tales in Grassy Springs for years to come—he was assured of an eager audience as long as he lived. That was a lead pipe cinch.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

GUNS OF VENGEANCE

An Exciting Action Novel by JAMES W. ROUTH

GUNSMOKE GIRL



When Tom Farnol first heard the girl sing of gold and romance and adventure, he did not know he'd be the one to make those hopes come true!

A NOVEL BY BRADFORD SCOTT

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THE GIRL on the tabletop sang a song of gold and romance and stark adventure. Her eyes were black as pools of midnight. Her hair was misted shadows glinting with golden lights. She flung back her curly head and sang while the bearded miners roared applause. They clumped the floor with mud-caked boots, hammered the table with brawny fists. The girl danced on the tabletop, her short skirts billowing away

from her silken legs.

Her lips were red as ripe apples. Her cheeks were golden with the kiss of the sun and the wind and the lancing rain. She laughed with a flash of milk-white teeth.

"She's just a cowpoke's dream of heaven when he's drunk!" murmured Tom Farnol.

Days' life swiftly flowing
Streams of tawny wine!
We fought the desert, tamed the hills
And built a blood-washed shrine!

Miners and Mexicans and cowboys and gamblers joined in a thundering chorus that shivered the smoke-stained rafters.

The days of old, the days of gold,
The days of Forty-nine!

The girl laughed again. She held up her slim hands in a compelling gesture. The babble died to a silence. The girl's clear voice rang through the room:

"I'm a Fuentes—in whose veins flows the blood of the Conquistadores! A Fuentes! Dancing on a table in a Cristobal saloon! But then my mother dragged the proud name in the dust before me! She married a wandering cowboy—because she loved him! Bartering the proud name of Fuentes for love!"

"Lady," bellowed a big puncher, "here's a wanderin' cowpoke you can marry right this minute, if you are of a mind to. Hoke Smith is just as good a name as Fuentes any day!"

The girl laughed and tossed him a kiss.

"What's this all about?" wondered Tom Farnol. "She isn't drunk, and she don't look loco. Gosh, but she's pretty!"

A sudden wave of anger swept over him. What business did such a girl have dancing in a hell-raising mining-camp saloon? With drunken men leering at her. Tom's slim hands balled into fists. Then his anger was abruptly engulfed in a surge of astonishment at himself. What business was it of his?

WHAT business? All at once Tom Farnol understood why he had ridden halfway across Arizona in pursuit of whatever happened to be just over the next hilltop.

"I was looking for her all the time and didn't know it!" he chuckled. "The devil with this mavericking around and raising hell all over! It's time I was settling down. And right there's the little lady that's going to settle down with me!"

Again she danced, wildly, flinging her rounded white arms, whirling on her tiny slim feet. There were glasses on the table, and a bottle of wine, but she touched none of them.

Suddenly the girl halted in the middle of an intricate step, her dark eyes glancing across the upturned faces. Tom Farnol, his sinewy, broad-shouldered height towering over most of the men around him, followed her gaze to where it centered on the swinging doors of the saloon.

"Somehow, I got a notion things are going to happen," he murmured.

Just inside the doors stood a tall man. His eyes were a clear blue, his hair crisply golden.

"Handsome as a pinto pony and mean as a tarantula," Tom thought. "And I got a notion the gent's in a plumb bad temper."

The girl flung back her head and laughed once more. "*Hola*, Carlos!" she called. "Come dance with me, cousin. Where there is one Fuentes, there is always room for another!"

She plucked a rose from her hair and flung it, striking him in the face.

The golden-haired man took two steps into the room. A terrible rage wiped all the beauty from his face and left it hideous. One slim hand flashed down and up. A thin, silvery gleam centered above his right shoulder for an instant.

Tom Farnol streaked a long-barreled Colt from its sheath and roared a shot over the heads of the crowd. The knife the golden-haired man had poised for the cast spun clanging against the wall. Its owner held his tingling fingers and yelled with rage.

The girl blanched a trifle. Had Tom Farnol's hand been a split-second less fast and sure, she would have felt the ripping tear of that long blade.

With a bellowing roar, the golden-haired man came charging through the crowd, boring straight for the table on which stood the girl. He reached it. His left hand flashed back, clasping glittering steel again.

The bewildered miners and punchers did not know what it was all about.

Neither did Tom Farnol, but he did know that in another moment that knife would take life from the dancing girl. His own hand shot forward, fingers spread wide and tense.

The down-hurtling wrist slammed against Tom's palm, and his fingers closed around it. With such terrific force had the golden-haired man struck, he whirled Tom halfway around and very nearly knocked him off balance.

TOM FARNOL

"You loco?" shouted the tall cowboy, and wrenched sharply.

The knife flipped from the other's hand. He spun as on a pivot and lashed out with his right fist. Tom weaved back and the blow glanced along his jaw. Then the other closed with him and they went to the floor, striking, tearing, rolling over and over. The girl screamed and leaped from the table.

Through the swinging doors boiled dark-faced men, knives and guns in their hands. They yelled Spanish imprecations and surged toward the roaring battle on the floor.

SHOUTING and screaming, Mexicans, miners and cowboys fought. Six-shooters began to boom. Knives flashed. In the middle of the howling mess were Tom Farnol and the man who had started the trouble.

They had battled to their feet and were standing toe to toe, slugging. There was blood on the faces of both, their breath came in gasps.

Suddenly the end came. Tom took one in the mouth, ducked another and started one of his own from close to the floor. It took the other squarely on the angle of the jaw. He went over backward and hit the floor with a crash.

Tom staggered over to him, fists clenched. Then a cross between a wildcat and a cyclone hit Tom, scratching, slapping, clawing. It was really only about a hundred pounds of girl, but for a moment he had his hands full. Finally he got her by the wrists and shoved her back.

"Leave him alone!" panted the girl. "Don't you dare hit him again!"

Tom stared in astonishment. A Mexican who had been hit with a beer keg caromed against the girl and knocked her back into Tom's arms. He swung her off her feet despite her struggles.

"You're going outa here while you're in one piece," he growled at her.

There was a window nearby. Tom took it in a flying leap, head bent, shielding the girl's face with his arms. He hit the ground, lost his footing and rolled over and over. By now he was bleeding from a dozen cuts and scratches, and one eye was closing. His temper was hardly sweet.

"Let me be!" cried the girl. "I'm going back for Carlos!"

"You're staying right here," Tom told her.

He got to his feet, still holding her in his arms. She tore free and darted toward the saloon. Tom caught her at the door, carried her, kicking and biting, across the street.

"Here's where you catch it, you misbehaving hellion!" he gritted.

He sat down on the edge of the boardwalk, whirled the little lady across his knees and spanked her with resounding thoroughness. Then he set her on her feet with a force that made her teeth chatter.

For an instant she stood staring at him, choking back sobs of pain and rage. Then, like sunlight flashing over cloudy water, she laughed. She flung slender arms about his neck and kissed him, and was gone quickly into the darkness.

Dazedly, Farnol stood staring in the

direction the girl had taken. He breathed deeply, touched his sore mouth with tentative fingertips, and grinned. "It was worth it," he chuckled. "My first kiss from the future Mrs. Tom Farnol!"

The uproar in the Down-She-Goes Saloon was lessening now. Several bodies were carried out, and a couple of wounded men. Tom saw nothing of the golden-haired man who started all the trouble.

"Guess those Mexicans were friends of his and helped him out," Tom decided.

II

SWAMPERS were swabbing up the blood and sweeping out the broken glass when Tom re-entered the saloon. Jim Grannan, the proprietor, nursing a black eye, greeted him:

"You're a sight, cowboy! Serves you right. You should've let Carlos Fuentes carve up that fool girl. She knew she'd drive Carlos wild by that dancing on the table. Guess that's why she did it, though.

"Carlos is considered the big skookum he-wolf around these diggings, but reckon he won't howl quite so loud for a spell now. Come into the back room and let me patch you up a bit."

While the good-natured saloonkeeper dressed his cuts, Tom asked a few questions.

"It's one of those things that's always happening in this section of what used to be Mexican," explained Grannan. "We got a passel of families of high-class Spanish descent, and they're still living a hundred years in the past. The Fuentes are just about the top layer of the herd.

"That young hellion you messed up is the grandson of old Pablo Fuentes, the high cockalorum of the bunch. The girl, Rita Devers, is his granddaughter. Carmencita Fuentes, old Pablo's daughter, married a cowpoke by the name of Pete Devers.

"Pete was a real hombre—the kind men like and women go loco about," Grannan went on. "Carmencita was so pretty it hurt to look at her, and she fell for Pete like a steer down a mine shaft. Old Don Pablo liked to have blown up. He disinherited her and shut the door on her. But she and Pete lived happy together until she died about four years ago.

"Then Pete goes and gets himself killed last year, leaving Rita with a little ranch on her hands and darn little money to run it with. There was a mortgage on the ranch and old Pablo bought it up from the bank. The notes fell due and she couldn't pay. Old Pablo proceeded to foreclose and have her thrown off the ranch."

"The darned old sidewinder!" exclaimed Tom.

"That's what we all thought," agreed Grannan, "but Pablo don't give a hoot. He hates every drop of Pete Dever's blood, and his big ambition is to run the girl outa the country."

"What'd she do about it?" Tom asked.

"First thing, she files a claim up near the head of Bluenose Creek and started panning gold," Grannan explained. "She don't find much, but enough to keep her going. Then she proceeded to do everything she could to make life unpleasant for the Fuentes. She comes down last month and braces me for a job in the dancehall, and darned if she didn't talk me into giving it to her! She works here four nights a week. And were the Fuentes wild!"

"I imagine they would be," chuckled Tom. "But," he added in a different voice, "she didn't strike me as the dancehall sort."

"She's not," Grannan replied instantly, "but she sure can dance, and brings in the trade. Young Carlos Fuentes, her cousin, has always sort of liked her and he came down and tried to talk her outa it."

"Carlos must figure she did it just to get him on the prod," guessed Tom. "And then she felt responsible for him because it was she who riled him."

He understood better now her championing of Carlos.

"You gonna hit the mines?" asked Grannan. "Seems everybody's panning dirt."

"I may have to," said Tom. "But what I'm really looking for is a job of riding. Haven't worked much since the spring roundups in the Cochise country."

"You ought to be able to get on with one of the spreads hereabouts," Grannan said. "This gold rush has thinned them out of hands and they're paying top wages. Drop in tomorrow night if you don't locate something during the

Ahead loomed the mountain. Behind, riders were closing in, yelling and shooting

day. There'll be chuck and a place to pound your ear for you here. I've sorta taken a liking to you."

TOM rode out of Cristobal the next morning. To the east were rolling hills above Bluenose Creek. Here and there raw yellow gashes showed where the miners were picking and shoveling and burrowing. West, north and south stretched the high rangeland the Mexicans called *Le Mesa Encantada*, the Enchanted Mesa. Farther north were the gloomy canyons and gorges of the Black Hell Hills. To the south loomed the purple mountains of Mexico. Three miles out of town, a fainter track branched off due south from the main trail. Tom hesitated a moment, then turned into it.

"Country looks sorta nice this way," he explained to his horse. "I got a hunch we'll run onto a nice little spread tucked away in one of those valleys over there. Let's go see."

He rode for several more miles, winding in and out among the low hills. Abruptly he pulled the sorrel up.

"Didn't I tell you?" he laughed exultantly.

He was in the mouth of a fairly wide valley. On either side the hills ran up steeply to end in fangs of grey stone. Well wooded, grown deep with succulent gramma grass, watered by two little streams that converged to form the pillar of a "Y" close to where the big cowboy sat his horse, the valley was a cattleman's dream.

"I'd rather own this spread than all the gold mines on that darn creek back there," Tom said aloud. "Wonder who owns it?"

He rode slowly up the valley. Soon he began to see cattle, fat and sleek, although not nearly as many as he had expected. He cantered through a grove and pulled up on the far side.

"There's the hacienda," he muttered, "and here comes somebody."

His gaze centered on the distant horseman and he lounged comfortably in the saddle, rolling a cigarette with the slim fingers of one hand as the rider approached. The cigarette was half smoked by the time the other was close enough for Tom to make him out.

"Old jigger," he mused, noting the white hair curling beneath the broad-brimmed hat. "Fits his hull like he grew there," he added, "and does he sit up straight!"

The old man did sit his saddle proudly erect. There was pride also, plenty of it, in his high-nosed face, intolerance in his widely-spaced blue eyes and a hint of ruthlessness in his thin-lipped though good-humored mouth.

"A salty hombre, but a squareshooter," Tom decided.

The old man rode to within a dozen feet of Tom before he pulled his magnificent black stallion to a halt. For more than a minute he sat looking the cowboy over. He noted the set of the lean, bronzed jaw and the promise of terrific strength and speed in the slim, quiet hands. He nodded as if settling some question with himself.

"Howdy," he said in a deep but not unpleasant voice. "Where you headed for?"

"Just riding," Tom told him.

"Riding through?" the other asked.

"That depends on whether I got any good reason for stopping off somewheres," Tom replied.

Again the old man nodded, in a satisfied manner.

"Looking for a job riding, I take it." It was a statement, not a question. Tom nodded without replying further.

"I need a good man," the oldster said, "a man who can take over this spread and run it. I intend to run a lot more cattle into this valley. I got some good men to put in here—vaqueros—but I need somebody to take charge. Well, what about it?"

CAREFULLY Tom pinched out his cigarette and tossed it aside before he countered with another question:

"What's the pay?"

"Foreman's wages, double what you was getting back where you came from. Good men are scarce hereabouts."

Tom touched the sorrel with his knee.

"Guess I'll ride up and look things over," he said signifying his acceptance of the job.

The old man held out his hand. "You'll stay on till this spread is in first-class running order?"

"You bet!" Tom assured him. "I'm not in the habit of leaving a job half finished."

They shook hands on it.

"I'll send the boys over tomorrow with a herd," the old man said. "I'll

send my grandson along with 'em. He can tell you anything you want to know. You better bunk in the ranchhouse and put the vaqueros in the bunkhouse. What'd you say your name was? . . . Farnol? *Adios!*"

As the oldster vanished in the grove, Tom suddenly chuckled to himself. He'd forgot to ask the old rancher his name!

Tom was as pleased with the looks of the inside of the ranch buildings as he was with the outside. Everything was in first-class shape. The ranchhouse was plainly but comfortably furnished. He found its brand was the Circle D.

"Looks like she's been lived in no great shakes back," he mused. "Probably the folks that were here got roped by the gold fever and quit ranching. Well, it sure made luck bust wide open and spill all over me. This is what I calls a real, honest-to-goodness job. Now if I can just run down that little dancing lady and get a double cinch thrown on us!"

Tom had left his warbag at Grannan's saloon. He decided to ride in and get it, and ask Grannan what he knew about the Circle D.

As he rode a little later through the straggling outskirts of Cristobal, Tom met the dancing girl, Rita Devers, riding out of town. Trim and slender in a serviceable riding outfit, with her dark curls peeping out from under her wide-brimmed hat and an efficient-looking Colt strapped to her slim waist, she seemed to have cast off her wild mood of the night before.

"Hi-ya, cowboy!" she greeted him. "Have you been in any more fights?"

Tom grinned at her. "I don't like fights. I run from them every chance I get!"

"Yes, I knew that the minute I looked at your hair," she agreed. "You usually get your directions mixed when you run, though, don't you?"

"Where are you headed?" Tom asked her.

"Back to my claim. I suppose you've heard all about me by now. I rode in for some dynamite."

She gestured carelessly to her stuffed saddle-bags.

Tom whistled. "If that lets go, you'll starve to death before you come down!" he told her. "Taking out much pay dirt?"

"Oh, so-so," she replied. "I'm making expenses and I'm prospecting some on the side, too. The mother lode is somewhere in this district, and don't you forget it. You thinking of taking up a claim?"

"I roped me a job ranching today," Tom explained. "Running a ranch a little ways south of here. The Circle D."

"The Circle D!"

She was staring at him with eyes wide in a slowly whitening face. Then she laughed, a bitter, contemptuous laugh. Color flamed in her cheeks once more. Her eyes blazed. Quickly she leaned forward and slashed him across the face with her quirt.

Then she was gone, her pony's hoofs thundering on the hard trail, the dynamite-filled saddle-bags flopping and pounding.

The cowboy stared after her, a dazed expression in his eyes. He raised a tentative hand to the smarting welt.

"Darned if I know what it's all about," he muttered, "but there's one thing I do know—all the dynamite that pony is packing isn't in the saddle pouches!"

III

JIM GRANNAN was not in town. Tom had a few drinks, a bite to eat, and went to bed without talking to anybody. Nor did he see Grannan the following morning before setting out for the ranch.

He got there ahead of the vaqueros and the herd. Neither showed up until early afternoon. Tom was sitting on the ranchhouse porch smoking when he heard the first thin wail of the distant cattle.

"Sound tired," he mused. "Must come quite a ways."

He watched them stream from the grove, a haze of dust hanging over them. Vaqueros—lithe, dark young Mexicans—sitting their horses with careless grace, herded them along. Tom noted both cattle and riders with approval.

"The right breed," he mused. "That old jigger knows how to pick them. Guess that laddie riding this way is the grandson he spoke about."

The rider came up the side trail to the ranchhouse at a fast gallop. His horse, a rangy bay, slid to a stop a dozen feet from where Tom lounged against a post. The man was on the ground be-

fore the horse came to a full stop.

For a split-second he and Tom Farnol stared at each other. Then he went for his gun. With the big six half clearing its sheath he froze, tense, his blue eyes glaring hate.

"Drop it!"

Tom Farnol's voice was edged with steel. The black muzzles of the cowboy's Colts yawned hungrily. Tom had shaded the other's draw by a flickering eye-flash.

Carlos Fuentes let his pearl-handled gun slide back into its holster. There was not the least fear in his hate-filled eyes, but he was no fool.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Tom holstered his own guns. "I might ask you the same question," he countered.

"My grandfather owns this spread!" roared Carlos.

For an instant Tom stared at him, wordless.

"Is—is your grandfather a tall old jigger with white hair and a hook nose and a pair of eyes that say, 'I get what I go after'?"

"That's him," growled Carlos. "Pablo Fuentes. What the devil do you care?"

Tom breathed more deeply than before. "And I shook hands on the job!" he murmured to himself. Aloud, he said:

"Fuentes, get this, and get it straight! Your grandfather hired me to run this spread and put it in shape. If I'd known who he was at the time, I wouldn't have touched the job with the tip of a sixty-foot rope! But I gave my word on it and I'm sticking to it, so that's that. Incidentally, your grandfather said you'd give me the lowdown on anything I need to know. What about it?"

It was Carlos' time to gulp and sputter. "Well, I'll be darned!" he finally got out. He drew a deep breath and set his thin lips.

"Mister, some day I'm gonna take you apart and leave you so they can't put you together again, but if the Old Man says you're running this spread, you're running it. And if he said for me to give you the lowdown on the range, why I'm giving it to you and giving it straight! We got time to ride to the head of the valley before dark."

Stiff of back, eyes looking straight ahead, the two young men rode off up the valley, side by side.

Tom found that the valley was really a wide box canyon. Other canyons, wooded and grass-grown and well watered, slashed through the hills to right and left until they butted up against the mountains. The valley proper ended at the cliff-buttressed foot of the great rounded peak.

"That thing's a volcano," Carlos Fuentes said. "It's supposed to be extinct, but you can always see a smudge of smoke in the air up there when the sun's shining right. And I've never seen snow lay on the top. I bet, if there was any way to climb up, you'd find her hot as hell!"

Tom nodded. "Doesn't matter, so long as she don't spill over. Yeah, we might as well head back for the ranch."

YOUNG Fuentes didn't stay for supper, although the dusk was spilling a blue shadow over the range and he had a long ride to Pablo Fuentes' great ranchhouse, the Bar F.

"I've got a hunch that gent and I are gonna tangle proper before this hand's played out," Tom mused. "Well—"

He left the sentence unfinished and went in to see what kind of cook Juan, who'd come with the vaqueros, might be.

"Amigo, you're good!" he voted when the last dish was emptied.

Juan grinned with a flash of teeth startlingly white and even in his wrinkled old face.

"I make you bust my buttons, you betcha me," said the old Mexican. "You eat all I cook, I cookum some more, *si!*"

"It'll take me till breakfast time to get this one unsnarled," sighed Tom, "and by then I suppose you'll have another one snarled up for me. I'm riding into town tonight. You keep a eye on things, Juan."

* * * * *

Jim Grannan was in his saloon when Tom Farnol arrived there.

"Thought you said old Pablo Fuentes was a Spaniard," Tom accused. "He doesn't talk like one."

"I said he was of pure Spanish descent," Grannan explained. "He was born this side the Line and so was his pappy, but till his girl Carmencita mavericked off the range, the blood stayed

pure. Carlos' mammy, for instance, was born in Mexico City. By the way, here comes little Rita to do her dance in a minute. Want to see her?"

Tom was sure that he did, but he didn't see any reason why he should let Grannan in on the secret. Grannan favored him with a sly glance from under his bushy brows and chuckled to himself.

A sudden clapping of hands and stamping of booted feet brought Tom's eyes around. He couldn't take them from the little figure drifting over the dance-hall floor like a flower loose from its stem.

The miners shouted and broke into still more riotous applause. The musicians fiddled and strummed madly. The girl whirled on her toes, silken skirts billowing. She plucked a rose from her hair, poised it in her slim hand. Her clear voice rang out:

"The first to touch my rose before it touches the floor shall dance with me. Ready?"

Whoops and yells greeted the proposal. The miners and cowboys surged forward with eager reaching hands.

With a gay laugh, she hurled the rose high. It flashed in the light of the lamps like a splash of blood. The miners shouted and jumped.

There was the crash of a gun.

The rose, poised at the tip of its flight, vanished in a shower of shredded petals. The crowd paused, gasped with astonishment. Tom Farnol strode forward, holstering his smoking gun.

"Ma'am," he drawled, "I claim I won. I touched the rose before it touched the floor!"

There was a moment of stunned silence, then a roar of laughter. Miners slapped their brawny thighs and doubled up with mirth. The thing appealed mightily to their sense of humor. Tom grinned thinly and strode up to Rita Devers.

"Going to stick by your bargain?" he asked.

Her face was white with anger, her black eyes blazed, but she placed her hand in his.

"I'd sooner dance with a coyote!" she hissed, as Tom encircled her supple waist with a long arm.

"It isn't what you'd rather do but what you're doing that counts," he told her.

TOM rode back to the ranch in a mixed state of mind. Rita Devers had danced with him, but she had absolutely refused to talk to him. Without saying so, she had given him to understand that she considered him in league with her grandfather, one with the high-handed snobbishness of the Fuentes.

"You see," Jim Grannan had explained, "by making the Circle D a going proposition, you're playing right into old Pablo's hands. If the ranch didn't pay, Pablo might have to let it go, and then there'd be a chance of Rita getting hold of it again. I happen to know that's the big aim in her life."

"Fuentes is rich, isn't he?" asked Tom.

"He is and he isn't," Grannan said. "He owns that whopping big Bar F ranch, but he got caught by this darn gold fever a while back and bought up a heap of land which some of our 'experts' figured to be rich in ore. Fuentes learned that lesson darn expensively. I understand his ranch is mortgaged right up to the hilt and he's hard pressed for ready cash. That's why I say if the Circle D didn't turn out a paying proposition, he'd have to let it go."

All of which gave Tom plenty to think about. He was in far from a pleasant temper the next morning when old Pablo Fuentes himself rode up to the ranchhouse. Tom was on the porch.

"I heard about you," the old man began without preamble. "My grandson came bawling about what you did over in the town the other night. If I'd known that the first time I saw you, the chances are I wouldn't have hired you!"

"And if I'd known who you were the first time I saw you, I know darn well you wouldn't have hired me!" Tom spat at him.

Old Pablo straightened up as if he had sat on a cactus spine. "What do you mean by that?" he snapped.

"Just this!" Tom told him, his eyes blazing. "I think the way you've acted toward your granddaughter about this ranch is rotten as a steer what's died of blackleg! You and your Fuentes pride! Where she's making a mistake is claiming to be connected with such a aggregation of horned toads! She'd oughta deny it every chance she gets!"

Old Pablo gasped and goggled. For a moment Tom thought he was going to burst.

"You impudent whippersnapper!" he stormed at last. "I'd ought to have you run clean off this ranch at the end of a rope!"

"Call up your whole bunch and let 'em try it!" Tom dared him. "You old billy-goat, if I hadn't given you my word and shook hands on it, I'd ride off this spread right this minute and wallow in a trough of sheep dip to get clean from such associations!"

The rage died out in old Pablo's eyes and was replaced with a crafty gleam mixed with something very like admiration. The suspicion of a grin tugged at the corners of his bristling white mustache. He nodded thoughtfully and when he spoke his voice had regained its normal tone.

"You did give me your word, didn't you? Well, keep it!"

With that, he mounted with the lithe grace of a youth and rode off the way he had come, leaving Tom to gasp and goggle.

For two days following, Tom Farnol kept his vaqueros nervously on the jump, whipping the Circle D into shape. Pablo Fuentes sent more cattle and Tom ordered a careful check of all Circle D cattle already on the ranch.

"There's too much hit-and-miss business in this section," he told the vaqueros. "Nobody ever knows how many steers he's got on hand or where they are. That makes it pie for wideloopers who specialize in cutting out little herds on the sly. You jiggers get busy on that check."

They got busy.

Tom rode to town, and found that he had other problems on his hands besides those of a run-down ranch. He entered Jim Grannan's saloon and met Hoke Smith, the big Tumbling R puncher who had jestingly offered to marry Rita Devers the night she danced on the table. Tom had a nodding acquaintance with Hoke.

Tonight, however, Hoke did not nod. He shouldered his way through the crowd at the bar and faced Tom, who eyed him wonderingly.

"Mister, this is a unhealthy country for polecats!" Hoke said.

The implication was plain. Tom's eyes narrowed slightly, otherwise his lean, bronzed face remained unmoved. He replied in an easy drawl:

"You feeling sick?"

For an instant Smith stared, taken aback by the unexpected retort. He doubled a brawny fist.

"In just five seconds I'm gonna take you plumb apart!" he bawled. "I'm gonna—"

Tom's fist landed heavily on Hoke's jaw, and Hoke landed on the saloon floor with a resounding thud.

IV

TOM stepped away from the bar and stood perfectly still, hands hanging loosely by his thighs.

Hoke Smith came erect with a roar, shook his shaggy head and went for his gun. Tom waited until it cleared the holster and then shot it out of his hand. Hoke howled his fury and jerked his left-hand weapon. He lost a finger that time, along with the Colt.

Hoke was blubbering with rage and pain. "You cursed paid killer, somebody'll get you yet!" he howled. "We'll run you and old Fuentes both outa the country 'fore we're through!"

"So that's it!" Tom muttered under his breath.

He opened his mouth to speak, but the crowd was closing in behind Smith with an ominous growl. Tom noticed that several cowboys from the Tumbling R and a couple of armed miners were spreading out fanwise. Tom's hands stiffened, the fingers spread claw-like.

"All right, you horned toads!" his voice cracked. "Fill your hands!"

Cowboys and miners crouched motionless, eyes slitted, jaws set grimly. Tom heard then a sharp double click behind him.

"Hold it! Every last one of you!"

The voice blared over Tom's shoulder. Not daring to take his eyes from the men in front of him, he saw them abruptly relax, their eyes widening. The voice behind him boomed again:

"Get your hands up and shuffle together!"

Behind the bar stood Jim Grannan, leveling a six-gauge shotgun. The yawn of the enormous muzzles took in the entire room. Both barrels were at full-cock. Grannan was hurling words at the group who stood shuffling nervously, hands on a level with their shoulders.

"Five of you ganging up on one

man! Evers, Farley, I thought better of you two. Johnson, you weren't never no good, and now you've proved it to everybody. Skinner, you and Perkins didn't need no proving! You know what I've a notion to do to the lot of you? I got a notion to make you take Farnol on one at a time! Don't sound so good, eh? I thought it wouldn't, you yellow sheepherders!"

The saloonkeeper was in a royal rage. Tom sensed that it would take very little to cause him to cut down on the shivering group.

"Let 'em go, Jim," he said. "They thought they were doing right, I guess. Reckon my tie-up with Fuentes doesn't look so good to folks that don't see all the spots on the cards."

"Just as you say," growled Grannan.

It was well past midnight when Tom rode out of town. Jim Grannan had counseled him against a possibe drygulching, but Tom had little fear of that.

There was a red glow beating against the sky as he turned off the main trail. He eyed it with a puzzled expression.

"That darned smoke-mountain gone on the prod?" he wondered.

He quickened his horse's pace and rode swiftly toward the valley mouth. Long before he reached it he was growling curses under his breath.

"It's the ranchhouse or the barns, or both," he declared. "No, how did that happen?"

When he cleared the final grove he saw it was one of the barns. It was burning fiercely, and before he pulled rein at the ranchhouse porch the walls fell in.

"Weren't any horses in there, were they?" was his first question.

"No," the excited vaqueros told him. "Only saddles and harness and much hay. . . . How did it catch? We know not, *Capitan*. We were awakened by the crackle of the flames."

Tom watched the fire die down until it was no longer a menace to the other buildings.

"No strangers were about," the vaqueros assured him. "The lighted cigarette, perhaps. *Si?*"

Tom did not think so. The riders trained all their lives to be careful of fire, would hardly drop a lighted cigarette or leave one lying where it could do damage. But how else could the barn have caught?

AFTER a few hours sleep, Tom was still puzzling over the mystery when he entered the kitchen and found Juan busy with a stack of dirty dishes. Tom was surprised, for he knew the old cook always washed up immediately after supper.

"You must've put away a hefty midnight snack last evening," he remarked.

Juan shook his white head. "No eat supper after I eat," he disclaimed. "Don Carlos hongry like anything. He get lotta chuck on outside of heem, you betcha me."

"Carlos was here last night?"

"Betcha me your boots. He ask for you. He wait. He eat. He cuss. He ride."

"Why didn't you tell me that last night when I asked if there were any strangers hanging around?" demanded Tom.

Juan shrugged expressive shoulders. "Don Carlos not stranger."

Tom grunted. "Guess that's right," he admitted. "Did Carlos say what he came for?"

"He bring pesos to pay wages. Put in safe. Juan go to town tonight, *si?* Put chunk of hell under and raise corner! Town paint me red!"

"Yeah, you can go," Tom told him absently. "I'll pay off after breakfast."

"Funny thing that a barn would catch fire and burn down the very night that yellow-haired hellion was hanging around here," he was thinking. "But why would he try to burn the place up? It don't make sense."

Three nights later, Tom was sitting on the ranchhouse porch, smoking a final cigarette before turning in. He was alone, Juan and the vaqueros having ridden to town hours earlier in the evening. It was a stormy night of boisterous wind and an occasional spattering of raindrops.

Suddenly the cowboy started, his high bootheels slid from where they were hooked over the rung of his chair and clamped to the floor. Somewhere nearby had sounded a sharp crack.

"Like a six-gun and yet not just exactly like one," he muttered. "It— What in tarnation?"

The single remaining barn had been a darker blotch amid the blue shadows. Abruptly it was cut by glowing reddish

squares—light streaming through the rough windows. The air was suddenly rank with the stench of burning oil.

"The whole inside's afire!" sputtered Tom, racing across the yard.

There were horses in that barn—his own big sorrel, and two others Juan had been treating for injuries.

Tom got them out, after a bitter fight that left him singed, bruised and bleeding. Squatting on his heels in the steadily increasing rain, he watched the barn go up in smoke.

"Well, that let's Carlos out," he growled. "He hasn't been here for nigh onto five days, now. He couldn't have set it, that's sure! But who did?"

He watched the flames leap high, shriveling the leaves on a tall tree that grew just behind the barn. A little later three of the adobe brick walls crumbled to a shapeless mass, leaving only the back wall standing. It sagged crazily.

Tom gave both bunkhouse and ranchhouse a thorough going-over before turning in, and found nothing suspicious. For a long time he tossed in his bed, trying to puzzle out a solution of the mystery. Finally he gave it up in disgust.

Late the following afternoon he poked and pried among the ruins of the burned barn, finding nothing. The fallen walls had left a hopeless jumble of crumbling bricks.

He approached the sagging rear wall with caution. The reason why it alone remained standing was plain: several heavy timbers had fallen in such a way as to prop it up and the rain had put out the fire before they burned through. They were charred and blackened but still of sufficient strength to support the bricks.

Something close to the wall and directly under one of the high windows caught Tom's eye. He picked his way toward it.

"Now how the devil did that get here?" he wondered.

THE OBJECT was a battered anvil. Lying on its face was a rounded block of iron with a flat underside. A strong iron ring was welded to the upper surface.

"I'd have sworn I saw that old anvil and that horse-block lying in a corner of the blacksmith shop last week," Tom muttered. "I know darn well I did! What they doing out here?"

Both horse-block and anvil were burned and blistered by the terrific heat. Tom hooked his finger in the ring and picked up the block. He glanced at the anvil face where it had rested, his eyes puzzled. On the anvil face was a queer-looking bluish smudge. On the flat surface of the block was a similar smudge.

Tom squatted back on his heels, glancing up at the high window and back to the smudged blocks of iron. Abruptly he stood up and hurried outside to what had been the barn. Beneath the tree back of the sagging wall he paused, his keen gaze traveling upward.

A sharp exclamation slipped between his lips. An instant later he was climbing the tree, his eyes fixed on a short length of stout cord that dangled from a limb that stretched toward the sagging wall.

Legs wrapped around the limb, he examined the frayed end of the cord. He measured the distance to the window ledge with his eye. The bit of cord was just the right length to reach that far.

"The sidewinder ran this string through the window and tied that horse-block onto it, letting the block hang a coupla feet above the anvil," he nodded. "He put a dynamite cap and a section of fuse on the anvil and piled oil rags all around. Wouldn't nobody notice it back in that dark corner behind the oats bin.

"He knew that sooner or later the wind would keep swaying the branch and pulling the string up and down across that rough window ledge, till it chafed in two. Then down goes the block onto the dynamite cap. Cap lets go and fuse starts burning. So do the oily rags and all that hay piled around. Barn goes up in smoke.

"He hasn't been here for days. Nobody'll suspect him. Clears him up about the barn that burned the day he was here, too. If it hadn't been for the rain keeping those beams from burning, this wall would have fallen down too and covered up the anvil and horse-block. Yeah, it was those little unexpected drops of water that hogtied you, Senor Carlos Fuentes!"

Tom pondered what to do with his discovery, and decided to go to town. Upon reaching Cristobal, he had a talk with Jim Grannan.

"Yeah, Carlos is somewheres around,"

Grannan said. "He was in here a while ago. Chances are you'll find him at the Hawg Wild."

The Hawg Wild was a roaring saloon, whose games were as crooked as those of the Down She Goes were straight. There were girls there, too—dusky senoritas with flashing eyes and sinuous figures.

The Hawg Wild was the hangout of the wildest and toughest elements of Cristobal.

Tom found Carlos Fuente seated at a table, a glass of tequila in front of him. He walked over, placed his hands on the tabletop and looked Carlos full in the eye. Carlos' face was a mixture of anger and surprise.

"What the devil—" he began. Tom's voice cut through the words:

"Fuentes, I don't know just what kind of a game you're playing, but it sure wears the double-cross brand. Those barns you burned belonged to your grandpa. If your idea was to tangle my rope, you sure mavericked clean off the range!"

"Why, you—" Carlos began in a blustering voice, that instantly convinced Tom of his guilt.

"Shut up!" Tom snapped. "And get this straight—from now on you're just as welcome on the Circle D as any other fanging sidewinder, and you'll get the same kinda treatment! If you think I'm running a bluff, come and call, or if you've a mind to, call right now!"

V

FARNOL stepped back from the table and stood waiting, hands hanging loosely by his sides. Carlos sat staring at him from eyes like blue ice in his whitening face. Tom knew perfectly well that it was not fear but deadly rage that was driving the blood from Carlos Fuentes' face.

"Nope, I couldn't do it," Carlos said finally. "You're too fast and accurate with a gun for me to have a chance this way!" He leaned forward and all hell raged in his glittering eyes. "I'm giving you some good advice," he said, his voice little above a whisper. "Pull that six-gun and use it, right now! That's the only chance you got of staying alive!"

He meant it, and Tom knew he meant it.

"I'm a plumb fool for not taking that advice," Tom said then.

Carlos rose to his feet. "You sure are!" he said, and walked out of the room.

The saloon was tensely silent as Tom strolled to the bar and ordered a drink. It remained silent while he slowly sipped his whisky. The bartender sighed noisy relief when the swinging doors finally closed behind his broad back.

"Them two jaspers make me feel like I was balancin' lighted matches on the edge of a barrel of gunpowder and wonderin' which way they are gonna fall," he grumbled, filling a glass with a shaking hand.

* * * * *

Tom learned that old Juan knew the Circle D range as well as he knew his own kitchen. Several days after Tom's run-in with Carlos they rode together along the foot of the towering peak that blocked the east end of the valley. Tom suddenly swung down beside a tiny, crystal-clear stream that trickled over the rocks. He knelt beside it and scooped up a handful of water, and let it fall with a startled oath.

"Why, it's hotter'n hell!" he exclaimed.

Old Juan nodded gravely. "Yes, and why not?" he remarked in Spanish, which Tom understood very well. "That's where it comes from," he replied.

"What are you talkin' about, anyhow?" Tom said.

"Far up on the mountainside," explained Juan, "is a cave, a quite innocent-appearing cave. But verily, *Capitan*, that cave is the mouth of Hell. Suddenly and without warning, there pours from it a flood of scalding water and still more scalding steam. For minutes that terrible flood roars forth. Then as suddenly as it came it ceases. For so long as a man can count a thousand slowly there is no water, no steam. Then again comes the awful flood. Never by as much as one second does it vary. Comes the flood. Then that period during which one can safely enter the cave, if he is loco enough to wish to do so."

Tom was interested. "You ever go in?" he asked.

"Yes, *Capitan*, in my youth I was quite loco. I entered a little ways, until I came to the place where one must crawl. There I stopped. But a comrade of mine,

who was even more loco, and very daring, went on. Beyond the place where one must crawl, said he, is a wide chamber. Beyond that one must crawl again, and then one reaches the spot where rise the infernal waters.

"It is a place of most awesome beauty, said my comrade. Deep in a great pit rage the fires of the volcano and in their light the cavern is as a chamber cut in the heart of an opal. From that pit rises the scalding water. How, I know not. My friend saw the vapors veil the fires before he started back. Almost too long did he wait. The flood was thundering on his heels when he emerged."

"How far to that cave?" Tom asked.

"Less than an hour of easy riding, *Capitan.*"

Tom turned his horse up the slope. "Let's go take a look," he suggested.

Juan immediately became agitated. In his excitement he lapsed into English.

"You go in there you cook me my goose!" he declared.

"I didn't say I was going in," countered Tom.

"You same as my comrade like you be," grunted Juan. "Both loco, you two."

ON THE faint trail up the mountain slope the going was not bad. About an hour after starting they rode through a scattering grove of stunted pines and wound up against the face of a tall cliff. All about were shallow, steaming pools. In the base of the cliff was a dark opening.

"From there out the water comes," said Juan.

Tom nodded, "Well, she's quiet enough, now."

"Wait," grunted Juan.

Suddenly, from the dark opening sounded a hissing. It grew to a murmur, a sobbing moan. An instant of tingling silence followed. Then again the hiss that swelled to a moan. Dense clouds of steam suddenly belched from the cave mouth. Then with a shattering roar a torrent of boiling water hurtled forth like a ravening monster.

For a full minute it hissed and growled and crackled. Then as swiftly as it had come it subsided, leaving only the denser clouds of steam rising from the pools to vouch for what had happened.

"Count," said Juan.

Tom counted, slowly, steadily. He was a few numbers past a thousand when the hiss sounded again.

"Never does it change," said Juan in Spanish.

Tom glanced toward the pines only a short distance off. Some of the trees had fallen in decay. He rode to one, and as the water boiled from the cave once more, he selected a fragment rich in resin.

"It'll burn like a candle," he muttered, and rode back to Juan.

The last wisps of steam were streaming from the cave mouth.

"Hold my horse and wait," he told the Mexican.

"*Cien mil diablos!*" howled Juan. "Come back! You crazy in my head! I got no brains for you. *Maldito!*"

Tom did not turn back. He slipped into the cave and lighted his torch. It burned brightly, giving off much black smoke but providing ample light. He hurried up the glassy-smooth, sloping floor, counting slowly in the first hundred. He was into the second hundred when he reached a spot where he was forced to crawl.

There was barely room for his body and the going was difficult. It took a full hundred of the remaining count to negotiate the narrow, winding passage. It opened into a lofty room.

As Tom hurried across this, a windy draft suddenly set his torch to flickering wildly. He glanced to the left and saw a narrow crevice in the side wall. He wasted a few precious seconds examining it.

It was barely wide enough to admit his body and about a score of feet in depth. The floor sloped steeply upward. The wind whistled through it, and high overhead he could see a dim filter of light.

"Opens to the outside," he murmured, backing out. "Chances are a man might hole up in there while the water went out, if he had to. Good thing to know."

The second crawling place was less difficult than the first. Tom went through it in less than ten numbers.

"Four hundred and fifty to come, four hundred and fifty to get out, a hundred to stay here," he said as he crawled into the final chamber. "Man, this is worth taking a chance on getting cooked to see!"

The chamber was a place of appalling beauty. Blue and gold and scarlet and emerald gleamed from the walls, their tints weaving and pulsing and changing in the fierce blasts of reddish light that flowed from a great circular pit in the center. There was intense heat and a rank smell of sulphur.

Tom hurried to the edge of the pit and glanced down. Far below was a heaving, writhing, glittering mass of molten fire.

The terrific majesty of the spectacle caused Tom to forget to count for many flying seconds. A low rumble almost at his feet brought him out of his daze with a start and he saw what he had overlooked at first.

To one side of the fire pit, and nearer the narrow opening by which he had entered, was a second chasm from which rose wisps of steam.

"That's where the water comes from," Tom quickly deduced. "It boils over and runs out the tunnel. Chances are some of it slops over into the fire and makes steam that helps to blow the rest out the tunnel."

He wasted no time on the return trip, but the cave was growling and rumbling and Juan was in a state of near hysteria when he finally exited from the cave mouth with wisps of steam wreathing about him.

RIDING to town the following night, Tom found it in riotous play. It was clean-up day at the mines and payday for the ranches. Cristobal was celebrating. Everywhere was music, song, dancing, gambling and drinking.

Gold flowed across the bars in a steady stream. The gambling tables were heaped with it. Women clutched it greedily in the early evening and scattered it with wild laughter before the wheeling stars had marched halfway down the sky.

Tom Farnol sauntered from saloon to saloon, drinking a little and enjoying himself much. The excitement and the glamour were getting under his skin. Lusty life ran riot in his blood. His greenish eyes glowed. Wide hat tilted rakishly, lips humorously a-quirk, he strode along, holsters tapping against his muscular thighs.

Tom entered the Down She Goes in search of Jim Grannan.

The place was booming. Bartenders fell over each other trying to keep up with the demand for drinks. The dance floor was so crowded the couples could barely shuffle along. All the games were going full blast.

Tom shouldered his way to the bar. As he sipped his drink, he felt a touch on his arm. He turned and looked into Rita Devers' big eyes. Her red lips moved.

"Get out of town, cowboy," she whispered. "Carlos—"

"I'm not heading anywhere just because of Carlos!" Tom interrupted.

"Listen to me!" she exclaimed impatiently. "It isn't Carlos. He knows he can't kill you in a fair fight, so he's brought somebody here that can!"

"Yeah?" He was mildly interested. "Who?"

The girl's lips whispered a name: "Webb Butler!"

Tom stared at her with thoughtful eyes. Webb Butler—killer, quick-draw artist, outlaw! Tom knew himself to be fast and accurate with a gun, but he laid no claims to such blinding speed and deadly sureness as that for which Butler was notorious.

"The big skookum he-wolf gunman of the bunch," he murmured.

"Yes," urged the girl. "It is madness to fight with him! No man has ever done so and lived. Carlos knows that. Butler will force a fight with you and kill you if you stay here tonight. Please go back to the ranch!"

"Why are you so interested, ma'am?" Tom asked her curiously.

"I don't want you killed on my account," she replied defiantly. "It was over me you quarreled with Carlos in the first place, wasn't it?"

She glanced up timidly for an instant, but immediately dropped her eyes again.

"Please," she breathed, "won't you ride back to the ranch at once—for me?"

Tom suddenly reached out a long arm, cupped her white chin in his hand and tilted her curly, dark head. She stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Ma'am," he chuckled, "the way I'm feeling right now, I'm sure sorry for Webb Butler! You stay right here—I'll be back in a minute."

He shouldered his way to the swinging doors, and out. Rita Devers stared after him an instant, then slipped through the crowd to a back room. A

moment later, robed in a dark cloak she was hurrying along the roaring street, frantically questioning men she knew and some she did not know.

Some distance ahead of her, Tom Farnol sauntered easily through the crowd, his keen eyes missing nothing.

"Old Hassayampa Hawkins once told me," he mused, "that the best way to whip a man who could lick you was to bring him the fight before he was ready for it. Now, just where would that Butler hombre hang out? The Hawg Wild, maybe!"

VI

THE HAWG WILD was busy, but quieter than the other saloons. There was always a tenseness there, an air of impending events. The men who gathered in the Hawg Wild were not of the type that made much noise. They preferred to listen, and watch.

Such was the individual who leaned against the bar and talked with Carlos Fuentes. Tall, black-haired and black-eyed, with a face the whiteness of soiled paper, he had the beaked nose of a vulture. His mouth was a bloodless gash that moved not at all when he spoke. His hands were long and waxen, with tapering, clawlike fingers. He wore two guns slung low and to the front. The bottoms of the holsters were tied down.

Beside Carlos stood other men—dark, furtive men with watchful eyes and lithe movements—Bar F vaqueros of his own hiring, without whom he seldom went anywhere.

"You'll likely find him at Grannan's place," Carlos was saying, his clear voice carrying above the murmur of the room.

"Wrong!"

The single word slammed through the swinging doors like a bullet. Hard on its heels came Tom Farnol. Just inside the door he paused, hands hanging loosely by his sides, eyes glinting greenly in the shadow of his hat.

"Wrong, Fuentes!" he repeated. "He's right here—waiting for that buzzard-faced killer of yours to get going!"

For a moment the big room was silent as the inside of a coffin. Carlos Fuentes and Webb Butler stood staring with hanging jaws. Then there was a wild shuffling of feet as men fought to get away from the pair.

Tom Farnol laughed tauntingly.

"Scared to fill your hand, Butler?" he jeered.

Webb Butler's face was a pallid mask of malignant fury. His dead-black eyes glowed like wind-fanned coals. Smooth, effortlessly, his white hands moved, a blur streaking to his big guns.

Tom Farnol knew he had no chance to beat that lightning draw. He didn't even try. As Butler's hands lifted he hurled himself sideward and down. Butler's roaring guns blasted the swinging doors to bits.

Prone on the floor, Tom Farnol shot from the hip, his Colt streaming a continuous blaze of fire whose flaming lances seemed to center on Webb Butler's breast.

The gunman screamed, choked. His slit of a mouth opened wide and he coughed up a mouthful of blood that ran down his white shirt front. Still coughing and retching, he fell, clawed at the floor boards an instant, and lay still.

Tom lunged backward into a crouch, both guns stabbing at Carlos Fuentes and his men.

"This way, cowboy!" a clear voice called.

In the shattered doorway stood Rita Devers, cloakless now, and she had Jim Grannan's six-gauge shotgun! The odds against Tom turned a sudden flipflop in his favor. Chuckling, he slipped through the door beside Rita, with Carlos Fuentes' curses following him.

By way of dark streets they hurried back to the Down She Goes. In an open space behind the saloon they paused.

"I'll slip in through the back door," the girl said.

Tom suddenly placed his hands on her slim shoulders and swung her about. She stood looking up at him, wide-eyed, startled, the moonlight etching her tumbled curls with silver.

"Why—why did you do it?" Tom said softly.

For a moment she faced him bravely. Then her long lashes drooped. She cast him a shy glance through their silken veil. Like the dawn wind whispering among the flowers came her answer:

"I—I don't know!"

"Still hate me because I'm working for your granddaddy?"

Again came that soft, hesitant answer: "I—I don't know!"

Suddenly she was swung up in his arms, crushed to his breast, slim little feet helpless in the air. His lips found hers, fiercely, bruising them. She gasped, half sobbed, then returned the kiss with her soft arms wound about his neck.

"I know now!" she whispered, and fled through the back door into the saloon.

FOR WEEKS Tom saw nothing of Carlos Fuentes and very little of Rita Devers. The ranch kept him busy. Old Pablo dropped around from time to time, gave a few orders and departed.

"That old jigger's got something on his mind," Tom decided.

Before long that something came out. Tom found the Circle D owner sitting in the ranchhouse one evening after a hard day on the range. Old Pablo began without preamble:

"The jig's up, son. My creditors have cracked down on me and I ain't got the money to settle. Everything'll have to go, including this ranch. You'll be out of a job after the first of next month. And I'll be looking for one, too, the chances are.

"Well, it don't matter much nohow," he continued, before Tom could speak. "All my kids are dead, and my wife. Carlos never had much use for me, and he's drifting farther away all the time."

"How about your granddaughter?" Tom asked softly.

Pablo's eyes remained wary. "We won't go into that," he said.

He muttered something that sounded like, "Too late, anyhow," but of that Tom could not be sure. A sudden pity for the tired, lonely old man living with his pride and his dreams of yesterday swept over him.

"I'm perfectly willing to stay on without pay until you get on your feet again," he offered.

There was a sudden gleam in Pablo Fuentes' frosty eyes, but he shook his head.

"No. Everything changes hands on the first."

With that, he rode away.

After eating his supper, Tom sat for some time in thought. He was dog-tired, but he saddled up and rode to town and had a talk with Jim Grannan.

"Sure, I'll put up the money to buy the spread for her," Grannan agreed heartily. "I heard rumors Pablo was going to have to let everything go. We'll just bid the Circle D in when it comes up for sale, deed it over to Rita, and I'll take her note. She won't have any trouble paying me off in a few years."

Well pleased with the evening's work, Tom rode back home.

The following day was payday and Juan and the vaqueros rode to town. Tom was in no mood for the diversions of Cristobal, so that afternoon Tom rode to the head of the valley. He wanted to investigate a small swamp in which calves sometimes got bogged down.

He pulled one bawling youngster out of the mud and got an irate charge from its mother by way of thanks. Avoiding the cow, he jogged along the base of the mountain. He was near the trail that led to the geyser cave when he suddenly pulled up and gazed intently down the valley.

"Now who the blazes is that in such a hurry?" he wondered.

A rider had burst from a distant grove and was scudding toward him like a wind-blown cloud. As Tom watched, another rider burst from the grove a mile behind the first. Another followed, and others, until Tom had counted seven in all.

"This is getting interesting," muttered the cowboy, loosening his guns in their holsters.

On came the rider, urging his horse to the utmost, glancing over his shoulder from time to time.

"Gaining on him," muttered Tom. "Now what the dickens is this all about?"

A few minutes later he realized he had used the wrong personal pronoun. The rider was a girl!

For another instant Tom stared in astonishment, then he urged his big sorrel forward. Even at that distance he had recognized the trim figure of Rita Devers.

SHE SAW him coming and waved a frantic hand. "Back! Go back!" the gesture said plain as words. Tom grimly rode to meet her.

Something whined over his head. Another something kicked up a puff of dust a few feet to one side.

"Throwing lead at me," muttered the puncher. "Rifles!"

The girl was screaming a frenzied warning as he pulled his horse to a

sliding halt beside hers.

"It's Carlos and his vaqueros!" she panted. "They know you are all alone on the ranch. Ride!"

"Where?" asked Tom, as he wheeled the sorrel.

"Anywhere!" screamed the girl. "They'll kill you if they catch you! Oh, can't you understand!"

Tom understood perfectly. His six-guns were no good against rifle fire. The low thunder of the pursuing hoofs was throbbing the air.

"Come on!" he told the girl.

"I got here as quickly as I could," she gasped as they raced toward the mountain. "A miner overheard them plotting it in the Hawg Wild. He came to Grannan's and told me. Jim was out and I couldn't find Juan or your riders. I was in the ranchhouse when Carlos and his gang rode past. They knew you were up here somewhere. I managed to ride around them and get a start before they sighted me. Where are we going?"

"I don't know," Tom admitted, "but it's gotta be somewhere darn quick! They're gaining on us. Your horse is about all in and mine is mighty tired."

Ahead loomed the mountain. Behind, riders were closing in, yelling and shooting.

"You ride along the base of the mountain and I'll ride up the slope," he told the girl.

"I will not!" she flamed. "You figure you'll draw them away from me. I'm going where you go! Always! I won't live without you!"

"All right," Tom told her grimly, "but it'll be one rough trip!"

An idea born of desperation had come to him. Straight up the mountain he urged his foaming horse, following the trail that led to the geyser cave. He heard the roar of the outrushing water as they crashed through the grove, the raiders yelling and shooting at their very heels.

"Don't ask questions—do just what I tell you," Tom told Rita as they jerked their horses to a staggering halt in front of the cave.

Swinging to the ground, he grasped her hand and dashed headlong through the opening.

"I've heard of this place," she gasped. "We are going to our death!"

"No, we're not!" Tom panted, hurrying along through the pitch-darkness. "I've been in here and I got an idea where we can hole up safe. You willing to trust me?"

"I'm coming with you, am I not?" was her answer.

That seemed to settle the matter definitely, Tom decided.

He crashed into the wall of the first chamber, round the narrow opening and crawled into it, the girl following. He could hear the faint shouts of Carlos and his men outside the cave.

"If they know about this place they won't follow," he muttered. "If they *don't* know about it, they won't follow very far!" he added grimly.

Wet, bruised, and gasping for breath, they reached the second chamber. Tom located the crevice by the wind's draft and guided the girl into it.

"The water won't run up into it," he told her, "and I figure the draft'll carry the steam and heat off up through that hole overhead. They can't get at us here, that's certain."

Tense and breathless, they waited. Tom heard the first faint hiss that heralded the rush of water. At the same instant he heard something else—the scrape of boot heels on rock.

The low moan was growing to a rumble, when a light flashed in the chamber below the crevice. Tom glided to the crevice mouth, gun ready.

By the light of a torch held high, Tom saw Carlos Fuentes striding across the rocky floor, and at that instant a cloud of blinding, blistering steam billowed from the opening that led to the fire pit.

VII

CARLOS screamed as the steam seared his face. Tom saw the torch waver as he turned to flee. Swift as thought, the cowboy leaped forward. Gasping in the hot bite of the steam, he seized Carlos and hurled him into the crevice.

The golden-haired man fell heavily and lay stunned, the torch sputtering out beside him. Tom leaped after him as the scalding water roared into the chamber. He dragged Carlos to the head of the crevice and huddled beside him with Rita.

Wind like a thousand furies howled through the crevice. It was hot as the breath of a blast furnace and reeking

with sulphur gases. The girl cried out chokingly. Tom felt as if his lungs were bursting. A red-hot iron band encircled his chest. Another bit deep into his temples.

Billow on billow of scalding steam poured into the crevice and was sucked upward by the howling draft. Tom tried to stand, but a mighty weight pressed him down and strove to hurl him into a ghastly black pit of unconsciousness. With all his strength of will, he fought it.

"If I give in we'll never get out," he kept telling himself.

Abruptly the steam clouds had thinned. Tom gasped a deep breath of something other than water vapor and sulphur. His strength began to come back.

"Must get out before the next blow," he muttered. "We'll never live through another one. Wonder if that was Carlos' men I heard yelling just before the water hit? Must have been!"

Rita was unconscious, limp, and breathing heavily. Carlos was sitting up. Tom could see him faintly in the dim light that filtered down from overhead. He groped about, found Carlos' torch and lighted it. In a few terse words he told Carlos what they were up against.

"We must get Rita out of here," he finished. "After that, you and I can settle our personal arguments."

Carlos, still somewhat dazed, glanced into the girl's white face.

"The only woman I ever cared for," he muttered, "and she turned me down for you! Hombre, this world isn't big enough to hold both of us!"

"Right!" snapped Tom. "Come on, we've got to get out of here! You handle the torch."

Picking Rita up in his arms, he shuffled out of the crevice and across the chamber. Minutes had elapsed since the last blow and he knew the time they had was fearfully short. At the mouth of the narrow opening he motioned to Carlos.

"Go ahead," he ordered.

But Carlos held back. "You first," he said. "You'll have to back out and pull her after you. You're the strongest and I'm still pretty well knocked out."

He was right, Tom was forced to admit, and didn't waste time arguing. He shuffled into the hole, feet first. Carlos thrust Rita's unconscious form in after him. Tom grasped the girl by the shoulders and began inching through the narrow tunnel. Almost instantly, bleak despair gripped his heart.

"We'll never make it," he gritted between set teeth. "Not a chance in the world!"

To his straining ears sounded the first faint hiss of the rising water. With maddening slowness he shuffled backward like a rat caught in a drain pipe, dragging the girl after him. Her face looked ghastly and unreal in the flickering light.

"Come on!" he shouted to Carlos.

"Keep going," came a muffled reply. "Get her out. Never mind about me!"

Something in the other's voice brought Tom's head up. What he saw made him curse aloud.

Carlos had curled his body into a compact ball that completely blocked the passage.

"Go on," he gasped. "Save her! I'll hold it back long enough to let you get out! Go on!"

WILD thoughts of crawling back and dragging Carlos free galloped through Tom's brain for a frenzied moment. But he instantly knew it was impossible. He could not pass the girl's body.

"So long, hombre! You're all man at the finish!"

The growling thunder drowned Carlos' moan as the boiling steam seared his body.

Panting, gasping, Tom shuffled back through the tunnel, inch by agonizing inch. Blinding steam swirled about him. Trickles of scalding water peeled the skin from his hands. His brain was one vast ferment of agony hammering inside his skull.

"She'll cave in any minute now," Tom muttered.

Then he was in the other chamber, the girl clasped in his arms, staggering toward the distant blob of light that was the cave mouth. He reached it, reeled through into the blaze of the sunset and stumbled toward the grove.

A roaring explosion hurled him headlong. Twisting about, he saw the whole cliff split asunder and topple over amid billowing clouds of steam. The cave mouth vanished under a splintered heap of stone. A hissing, bubbling, gurgling sounded, then silence.

Tom knew what had happened. The water, dammed by Carlos' body wedged in the tunnel, had backed up and spilled into the fire pit, until the resulting pressure blew the cave to pieces and shattered the cliff.

As he strove to bring Rita back to consciousness, the geyser boiled through a new opening.

Rita moaned, sighed, and opened her eyes. Tom gathered her close. Their lips met and clung, and parted but to meet again.

"You're all right, dear?" she asked.

"Feel like I'd been dragged through a knothole and curried with a hay rake," Tom admitted. "But I've got a notion I'll survive long enough to be a grandfather." Which remark, for some reason, caused her to blush.

Tom told her of Carlos' heroic death. "It's something to be a Fuentes, after all," he concluded.

Rita sobbed softly in his arms for a while. "Let's see if we can find his body," she suggested.

But they could not. It was buried deep beneath the shattered stone.

"We might as well be riding," Tom suggested. The rest of those hombres must have got boiled by the first blow. See, there are their horses."

Rita was staring at one of the rock fragments. "Tom," she exclaimed, "look here!"

Tom looked, and whistled with astonishment. "You said the mother lode was somewhere around here," he recalled. "Maybe this isn't it, but it's rich enough to look like it!"

The rock was spongy, porous, and every inch of it was crammed with gold. The threads ran crisscross through the quartz like fine wire.

"Well," said Rita finally, "it looks like Grandfather Fuentes is a rich man, after all."

Remembrance rushed over Tom. Quietly he told her of his plan to buy the Circle D for her with the money Grannan was willing to lend.

"And no one knows about this gold strike but you and I," he finished.

For a long moment they looked into each other's eyes. Then the girl smiled and Tom chuckled. He gathered her close and kissed her.

TOGETHER they rode to Pablo Fuentes' Bar F ranch, their weariness and their slight burns and bruises already forgotten with the elasticity of youth and health.

Old Pablo received them without emotion. He listened to their story.

"So you see, the price you're asking for the Circle D isn't hardly right under the circumstances," Tom concluded. "With that gold you can square up all your debts and hold onto your spreads."

"That'd be fine," old Pablo agreed, "but I don't own the Circle D."

"You don't? Then who does?"

Pablo went to a desk and took a paper from a drawer.

"This is a deed I made out about a month ago," he said. "Son, what you said to me that day you found who I was sort of set me to thinking. I began to figure maybe I hadn't done the right thing by Rita after all. Guess that Fuentes better'n-anybody-else notion that's been handed down to me is sort of loco. I thought this home spread here, the Bar F, would bring enough to square my debts. So I just deeded the Circle D over to you and Rita as joint owners. And I'm not going back on it! That gold mine is yours!"

For a moment, Tom stared at him. Then, with a grin, he curled one long arm about Rita's trim waist and patted old Pablo on the shoulder with the other.

"What difference does it make, anyhow?" he chuckled. "It's all in the family!"

COMING NEXT ISSUE

GUNSMOKE ROAR ROCKS HONDO TOWN

IN

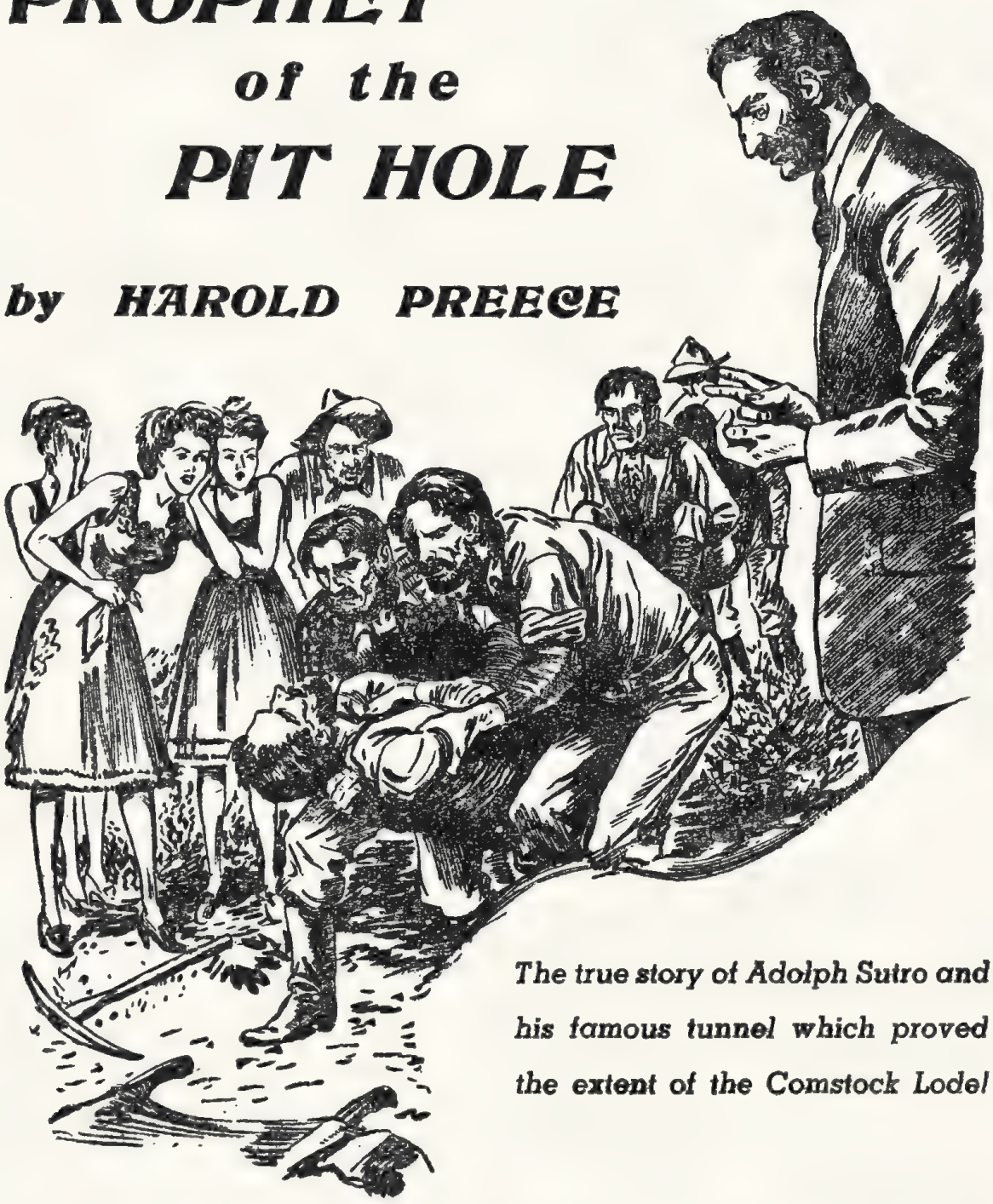
HELL FENCED OFF

By LARRY A. HARRIS

PLUS FOUR OTHER NOVELS!

PROPHET of the PIT HOLE

by HAROLD PREECE



The true story of Adolph Sutro and his famous tunnel which proved the extent of the Comstock Lode!

SIX TIMES the sweating rescue party dumped something that was not silver at the pithole. Six times they brought out dead men.

They laid them on stretchers for Virginia City's undertaker to haul down Comstock Hill. The bodies were scorched and seared like the earth, that second year, 1860, of the Comstock Lode.

Life was cheap where the earth was rich, out here in this new country of

sand and sun and six-guns the maps called Nevada Territory. But death underground was a calamity where death above ground was a commonplace. Now, live men who'd swapped shots with the dead men, huddled together around the pit to mourn the victims of the Comstock's latest cave-in.

One man stood apart from the crowd of tight-faced miners and the shocked, sniffling dance-hall girls. He was a big man with heavy dark hair, neatly brushed. His long, restless fingers were counting off the dead.

Thirty this cave-in. Twenty, last month. Fourteen, the month before, if you counted only the ones found and brought to the top.

His lips started mumbling something. A miner stopped to listen.

"Can't make you out, Adolph," the miner said. "What's that you're sayin'?"

The big man turned. "The Jewish prayer for the dead," he answered. His voice was bitter. "But those poor devils needed praying for before they ever went down that hole to dig silver for Bill Ralston."

The miner gave a scared look around. His hand gripped the shirt of the big man as he half whispered:

"Reckon this'll set you off talkin' 'bout your tunnel, pardner. Reckon Banker Bill Ralston, up in Frisco, will be swearin' to run Adolph Sutro outa the diggin's if he don't stop spoutin' foolishness."

Sutro's eyes blazed. "When *you* stop spouting Bill Ralston's foolishness, Jim," he thundered, "come to my office and let's talk some sense."

But the miner only shrugged and walked away.

The big man looked across Comstock Hill toward another hill. That was Boot Hill, where men got planted after they'd been plugged. At least, those men had had a fighting chance in a shooting spree. Those who went down into a mine had no chance when the damp earth started crumbling on a mine wall or when water rushed suddenly into a shaft. Often, men were literally boiled to death because the water in some of the deep underground streams had the approximate temperature of hell.

Sutro's eyes roved from Boot Hill toward the town. With quick, nervous steps he walked down the hill, toward Main Street. When he reached his office, he hung crape on the window for the dead miners. He locked the door because he wanted no more customers that day.

Sutro Urges His Tunnel

His long fingers touched the dial on his safe. Adolph Sutro was remembering his battle to save human life as he pulled out the survey plat that Virginia City joked about over its bullet-scarred bars.

Sutro had devoted his skill as a crack mining engineer to the surveying of the Comstock Lode with its rich deposits of precious ore. His figures showed that the only way to conquer the treacherous waters was to divert them into the nearby Carson River.

"See," he'd say, whenever he spread out the plat in the offices of mining companies, "you've got a fine outlet for the water in the river. You've just got to make it easy for the water to get there, that's all. See this low spot on the hill? We'd sink a tunnel there and run it four miles to the river. I'd dig it right through Mount Davidson. With the help of a few pumps, it would be a natural drain pipe."

Always he'd paused hopefully before adding, "You'd save money and you'd save men because you'd never have a cave-in. You'd make more money because the men could dig down to rich ore that is now blocked by mud and water."

Always, he'd heard the same answer:

"Good idea, Adolph. But the Comstock Lode'll be played out by the time the tunnel'd be finished. That's the way Bill Ralston figures it. And if we stake you, he'll stop stakin' us."

Sutro had never met Bill Ralston. The banker was somebody you felt rather than saw around Virginia City. When he pulled the purse strings at his Bank of California, in far-away Frisco, every man in Virginia City, from mine owner to mine digger, jumped. Everybody but Adolph Sutro.

Now, Sutro was thinking bitterly: "Bill Ralston owns everything around here, except a prickly pear and a couple of sandhills. But he never sees them, any more than he sees the dead men pulled out of his mines."

He heard the trotting of horses outside. Victims of the cave-in were taking their last ride to their last resting

place. Sutro put the plat under his arm and jammed his hat on his head. He had something to say at Town Hall.

As he walked down the street, Virginia City was returning to its usual life after the brief shock of death. Glasses clinked in the pizen palaces. Squeaky fiddles and banging guitars were attuned to the shrill, high laughter of the dance-hall sirens. Men who staked their rolls on the faro tables would soon be wondering who'd buy them breakfast tomorrow. Somewhere close by a pistol barked, and another gun roared back.

Adolph Sutro was oblivious to it all as he walked rapidly toward the Town Hall. He was thinking of the kith and kin of the men he'd seen pulled out of the mine. One man had shown Sutro letters from his wife; letters which said that "the children miss daddy." Others had told him of their plans to return home and start their own businesses once they'd made their pile. Now, their dreams would rest with them on Boot Hill.

He was thinking of all the others, roistering and drinking now but doomed to die unless the mines were made safe. His strong face wore a troubled look when his big frame pushed into the office of Virginia City's placid mayor.

His Honor frowned the least bit when he saw that Sutro was carrying the plat. But he jumped up and put out a fat, contented hand.

"Howdy, Adolph. Wanta buy some good minin' stock? Quick money and—"

Sutro was blunt and to the point.

"Mayor, what are you and the council going to do about the cave-in today?"

The mayor shifted slightly, almost imperceptibly, in his chair.

"Do, son? What are we going to do? Why, we can't do a dad-blasted thing but feel sorry. Old Comstock's like a stuck pig—just hates havin' her belly ripped open. Just got to take your chances and rip out all you can while the rippin's good. That's all."

Sutro brushed a sand gnat impatiently from his face. "Mayor, you and all the other mine owners can rip out a thousand times as much without losing a man if you'll figure your stakes bigger. The Comstock Lode'll last for decades if—" Sutro began unrolling his plat.

The mayor waved it away. "Don't wanta see that piece o' paper no more, son. But here's somep'n else writ on paper I been studyin' a heap about."

His fat hand moved toward a drawer, pulled out a newspaper clipping. The mayor read aloud:

"The working of the mines is done without any system as yet. Most of the companies commence without an eye to future success. Instead of running a tunnel from low down on the hill and then sinking a shaft to meet it, which at once insures drainage, ventilation, and facilitates the work by going upwards, the claims are mostly entered from above and large openings made which require considerable timbering, and expose the mine to all sorts of difficulties."

Sutro detected the little mad edge on the mayor's voice. "That piece is signed 'Adolph Sutro, Virginia City, Nevada,'" he said with studied carelessness. "It was published in a Frisco paper right after the council turned you down for tax money to dig your tunnel. Tunnel might wind up in Chiny for all I know."

"I can tell you it won't wind up at Boot Hill," Sutro shot back. But the mayor was still fumbling with the clipping.

"Bill Ralston read that piece in Frisco. Made him mighty mad. And I ain't meanin' to cross him." The mayor's voice was grieved. He gazed solemnly at a pair of deer antlers on the wall. He was trying to be kind when he spoke again. "Ever'body likes you around here, Adolph. But you're a dreamer. If you don't wake up and fergit them cranky idees, you won't last as long as Virginia City. And that won't be any longer than when the last bar o' silver is hauled out o' the Comstock.

"I hate to say it as mayor. But ten years'll see the finish o' Virginia City 'cause there won't be nothin' to keep it alive. It'll turn into another ghost town." The mayor's eyes met Sutro's. "Son, I'd sure hate for you to turn into a ghost with it."

A Fighting Man

But Adolph Sutro never minded threats. He hadn't minded them back in 1848 when he'd fought in the German Revolution to throw off political oppression. The forces of freedom had lost, and Adolph Sutro was among those—Christians as well as Jews—who had had to flee their homeland. Many of them had come to America where a man

could breathe and call his soul his own.

He'd fought crowned kings in Europe. He didn't mind fighting uncrowned kings in America. The mayor had laid bare the banking king's weak spot. Bill Ralston feared the papers.

A month later, a new kind of man-tribe descended on Virginia City. They carried their lead in pencils instead of in pistols. They spent a lot of time writing on bales of paper in a building rented by Sutro. They called themselves journalists, and they poured in by stagecoach from every part of America.

Presently every Western newspaper, from the Frisco dailies to little mining town weeklies, was running regular pieces about how many more lives could be saved and how much ore could be mined through Sutro's tunnel. One article told how everybody thought the mines of Europe were played out from centuries of digging. But tunnels had been dug and dangerous waters drained off. Now, miners could go farther back and farther down, and the mines were busier than ever.

Sutro's engineer friends in Europe sent him figures showing how mine deaths and accidents had decreased since the digging of the tunnels. These figures got splashed on the front pages of dozens of papers. So did articles telling how the same families had worked the same European mines for generations because good engineering kept them going.

More cave-ins buried more miners in Nevada and Colorado and California. Sutro's "writin' fellers" were on hand to interview survivors. They got statements declaring that the tragedies wouldn't have happened if the mines had been made safe with tunnels. For Adolph Sutro was trying to save not only the men and the mines of Virginia City, but the men and the mines of every camp in the West.

He was bleeding himself white to do it. He was making money because even the mine owners who laughed away his tunnel still admitted that he was Nevada's top mining engineer. But crusading takes money. Into Adolph Sutro's crusade went his handsome engineering commissions as well as the profits from a metallurgical works he'd started.

The miner, Jim, stopped him on the streets of Virginia City, one day. "Adolph," he said, puzzled, "you're the best-hearted feller who ever hit this territory. But why're you shootin' your roll payin' them pencil-slingers to write about us pick-slingers?"

Sutro laughed and handed him a cigar. "Because, Jim," he answered, "the pencil-slingers will do their job and move on. But you pick-slingers will stay and build up Nevada."

"Can't see it, Adolph." The miner was scratching his head dubiously when he walked off.

Bill Ralston subscribed to every paper in the West. He read the articles. He spewed and sputtered in Frisco. The mine owners spewed and sputtered in Virginia City. They began calling Sutro "a liar and a lunatic."

Their barks softened to growls when a tall, distinguished man with a military bearing and pince-nez glasses stepped off the stagecoach. The visitor introduced himself as Baron von Richtofen of Germany, come to visit his old friend, Adolph Sutro. Even the mine owners of Virginia City recognized his name as that of a world-famous mining expert.

The Baron's Report

The baron checked the survey records of the Comstock Lode in the courthouse. He examined Sutro's plat. Then he made his own survey.

Afterward he invited Sutro and the mine owners to hear his report. Sitting at a table, he spread out his survey.

"Gentlemen," he said, putting his arm around Adolph Sutro, "my friend is the finest mining engineer you've got in America. It is incredible that you have wasted so many human lives and so many good dollars in getting out your silver. The Comstock Lode is a true natural fission that runs back into the earth for miles you never dreamed about. The silver that's hidden there makes Midas look like some of the worn-out derelicts I see around your saloons. A tunnel is the only safe and cheap way to mine that wealth."

Sutro's newspapermen played up the Baron's report in papers all over the country. The price of silver shares soared on the stock market when it was learned that the Comstock Lode was practically inexhaustible.

But the mine owners didn't budge. They claimed that Sutro and the baron had rigged the report just the same as

sharp traders salted played-out mines.

Then there was another cave-in. Adolph Sutro chipped in to help bury the ten men who had been burnt to a crisp. The preacher who conducted their funerals sought him out.

"Mr. Sutro," he said earnestly, "I have to be for anybody who's trying to save human life. I have to be for you and your tunnel. When I hear them spiting you, I remember that 'a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country.' And that must mean Nevada."

"Thank you, Reverend," said Adolph Sutro. "Maybe something can be done for human life now that Nevada is coming into the Union and can make its own laws."

Adolph Sutro was on hand with his plat and charts when Nevada's first state legislature met in the fall of 1864. Four years had passed since he had started fighting for the tunnel.

Countless men had died in the mines since then, and still the tunnel existed only on paper. But maybe Nevada's own elected representatives would give him a franchise to dig it.

"Gentlemen," he told the legislators, "Nevada is a new state, making a new start. Nevada has to think first of its people. All the silver in Nevada won't be worth a scrap of baling wire unless the mines are made safe for men to take it out. Now a tunnel—"

Some of the legislators tapped their heads and glanced knowingly at each other. There was a dead silence when Sutro finished. Finally, a member sighed, "Bein' as that asylum ain't built yet, let him have his franchise."

After the legislature adjourned, a handsome figure approached Sutro. The engineer recognized him—William M. Stewart, a big silver man and Nevada's newly elected United States Senator.

The senator grabbed his hand. "Sutro," he said, "I'm the only man here who doesn't think you're crazier than a locoed burro. You've done more to break the hold of the Ralston Ring over Nevada than anybody I know. Organize a corporation to dig your tunnel—use my name as president. I'll see what I can do for you in Washington."

Meanwhile Bill Ralston was fighting to keep his influence in Nevada. So Sutro wasn't surprised when he learned Ralston wanted to see him in Frisco.

They met on a quiet day in 1865. Sutro's frank and open expression met the shifting gaze of the banking tycoon. Then the two, whose battle had rocked the West, sat down to talk.

"Sutro," the banker began, "many a man with your hard feelings would come after me with a Colt. But I hear you never wear one."

The Search for Money

"Ralston," Sutro answered drily, "shooting you wouldn't get the tunnel built. I don't want your life. I want your money to build that tunnel so that life won't get squashed out like a pack mule stepping on a prairie dog."

"How much?" the banker asked.

Sutro looked beefy Bill Ralston in the eye. "To keep men from being scorched to death—to keep the Comstock Lode going after we're long gone—all you got and then some."

The banker drummed on his desk. "Money's tight with the Civil War just finished. But I'll give you letters to the mine owners in regard to the tunnel. You'll charge them two dollars on every ton of silver for using the tunnel after it's built. If you can raise three million dollars from Eastern capitalists in two years, I'll see what I can do."

Ralston had surrendered. At least, Sutro, off to raise the money, thought he had. But a few days later the tycoon went into a long huddle with William Sharon, manager of the Virginia City branch of the Bank of California.

"Let him chase around—he needs the trip," Ralston said with a laugh. "When he's through, we'll build the tunnel ourselves—and run it ourselves."

Twenty-three companies signed up with Sutro to use the tunnel when it was finished. Senator Stewart got the Nevada legislature to pass a resolution asking Congress to grant Sutro a loan. Then Congress authorized the tunnel—but appropriated no money.

Sutro's money-raising trip had been a fiasco. The Eastern banks, to whom Ralston had given him letters of introduction, had turned him down cold. When he returned to Virginia City, old friends crossed the street to avoid speaking to him. When he picked up the local paper, which was controlled by Ralston, he found in it a big piece saying that the tunnel would ruin the town.

Bill Ralston had knifed him. Sutro's

money was gone, but he refused to give up. Not long after his return to Virginia City a fire burnt dozens of men to death in the Yellow Jacket mine. The miners' union demanded an investigation, and the union men were his friends. Now was the time to act.

He had enough money left for a pot of paint and some billpost paper. He flooded the town with posters, urging the miners to turn out for a mass meeting at the Opera House.

On the night of August 19, 1869, the saloons of Virginia City were deserted. Miners on the day shift went straight to the Opera House upon leaving the mines, their carbide lamps still hooked to their caps. The crowd packed the seats and jammed the aisles. The miner, Jim, had come early. Sutro, on the stage, saw him in the front row.

The president of the union banged a gavel. "Boys," he said. "Adolph Sutro called this meeting, and the union was proud to make it official. If we'd listened to Adolph, maybe the men from the Yellow Jacket wouldn't be lyin' in Boot Hill now. Maybe a lot o' other men would be walkin' the street 'stead o' fertilizin' sagebrush." He turned and waved his gavel. "All right, Adolph, you got the floor."

The rafters rang with cheers as Sutro stepped forward. As he waited for silence, he saw the minister who had encouraged him sitting next to his friend, Jim. Adolph Sutro started with a phrase from the Bible:

"They sold the righteous for silver—" That brought down the house. Everybody knew he was hitting at Bill Ralston and Bill Sharon.

"Men," Sutro went on, "once, Andy Jackson put the banks in their place when they got out of hand. You don't have an Andy Jackson today. But you've got the power in your own hands to put the Bank of California in its place.

"You've got the muscle power to dig the Sutro Tunnel. Bill Ralston and Bill Sharon know that the first pick struck into that tunnel will be the first pick struck into their graves. That first pick will be the signal for a new era when men won't be burnt and blistered and blasted for trying to make a living."

Hands thundered applause; cowhide boots banged on the floor. The miner, Jim, leaped to the stage and held up his hand. "Boys," he said, "nobody's made more fun o' that tunnel than me. But now, Adolph," turning to Sutro, "I'm finally willin' to hear you talk sense. Here's the first five hundred to git that tunnel goin'."

He handed Sutro five one-hundred-dollar bills. By that time, the minister was coming forward with twenty and apologizing because he didn't have more. Men started rushing toward the stage, their pocketbooks open. The president counted up the evening's donation. It figured up to fifty thousand dollars.

They started the tunnel with a big barbecue on October 19, 1865. They ate hearty because they had a long, hard job ahead. When the meal was over, Adolph Sutro stood up with a drill in his hand. "All right, boys!" he said. "Here's where we start."

He stripped off his shirt. He sank the drill into the ground. Some clods flew up. When he looked around him other men were bearing down with their tools.

Help from Scotland

Month after month, year after year, with Sutro leading the pace, they dug and ate and cussed and slept together. But the digging went on so that no more men might be dug, dead, out of the mines.

Four hundred men kept busy over three eight-hour shifts. Often Sutro worked fourteen hours at a stretch. Ralston's newspapers called him "a wildcat swindler" and "a played-out carpetbagger." But names didn't faze him any.

As the digging went on, Sutro was continuing his fight to get an appropriation from Congress. He made endless trips to Washington to argue before committees and he was spurred on by the knowledge that Ralston's henchmen now were trying to repeal the law that authorized the tunnel.

He made trips to Europe, too, to contact bankers there. Finally, a Scottish bank loaned him $650,000. He needed all that money for operating expenses. But he used a part of it to build a modern hospital with a doctor and a nurse in the little town called Sutro that had sprung up around the tunnel. He was broke again when the Scotchmen came through with another $800,000.

It got hotter and hotter as the men dug deeper. Still thinking of human life, Sutro ordered the three long shifts changed into four short shifts. But they had to grab the drill from his own hands before he would stop working.

They drilled through mount Whitney. They wrestled with rock and huge underground boulders. The ground fiercely opposed their efforts, resisted shovels and drills, reluctantly gave way to the tools men sank into its vitals. But few men turned back, and few admitted tiredness.

Then, on July 8, 1878, Sutro's drill struck soft dirt. When the dirt gave way, he stepped into an underground room whose walls were of silver. A man was hacking the ore from the walls. He turned and recognized Sutro.

"Well, by gum, Adolph, you made it," he said, "even if my boss said you wouldn't. You're in the Savage mine—right in the center of the Comstock Lode. . . . I reckon the hell water in this dern place is all set to float down your tunnel."

Sutro ran back into the tunnel and shouted at his men digging there:

"We made it, boys, we made it! We connected with the Comstock Lode. We dug our tunnel."

Drills and shovels were thrown down. Men rushed ahead into the mine to see the connecting place. They sang and bawled and clapped each other on the back. That night, Virginia City was one huge celebration with jugs flowing freely and fiddles scraping.

Never did Nevada honor any man as it honored Adolph Sutro. Men who'd crossed the street to keep from speaking now ran after him for blocks just to say "Howdy." Others slapped him on the back till his big shoulders smarted from so much friendliness. The mayor dogged his steps, swearing to everybody who'd listen, "I knowed my friend Adolph'd do something and do it big first time I ever laid eyes on him."

"Now we'll be able to get mine safety laws passed in every state of the West," the union president told Sutro. "Labor's never had a better friend."

Sutro felt a gentle tap on his shoulder as he walked down the streets of Virginia City, the day after his triumph. He turned around to face the preacher. "Couldn't take no part in the goings-on, last night, Mr. Sutro," he said apologetically. "But you've made my job a whole lot easier."

"How's that, Reverend?" Sutro asked.

"Because men are already talking about bringing their sweethearts out here and setting up homes, since they know the ore won't play out. Guess I'll have more marryings than buryings from now on. That's something for a preacher in Virginia City."

Sutro chuckled. "Which reminds me that I've got to pay more attention to my wife, now that the tunnel's through."

Sutro's Triumph

Sutro still had one last battle to fight with the Ralston Ring. After the tunnel started operating, Ralston told the mine owners to pump their flood water into the tunnel, but not to pay him his two dollars a ton royalty.

The mine owners tried it only once. "We'll take care of that, boys," Sutro told his men. "Build a watertight bulkhead in our tunnel. Then pump the water right back into their mines."

One by one, the mine owners surrendered and signed contracts to use Sutro's Tunnel. Adolph Sutro had put in nine years of back-breaking labor digging it; nineteen years of bucking the Ralston Ring. His hair was graying, and his muscles were tired. But he knew that no more men would be buried or burnt underground in the Comstock Lode. He would no longer be seeing the faces of dead men in his dreams.

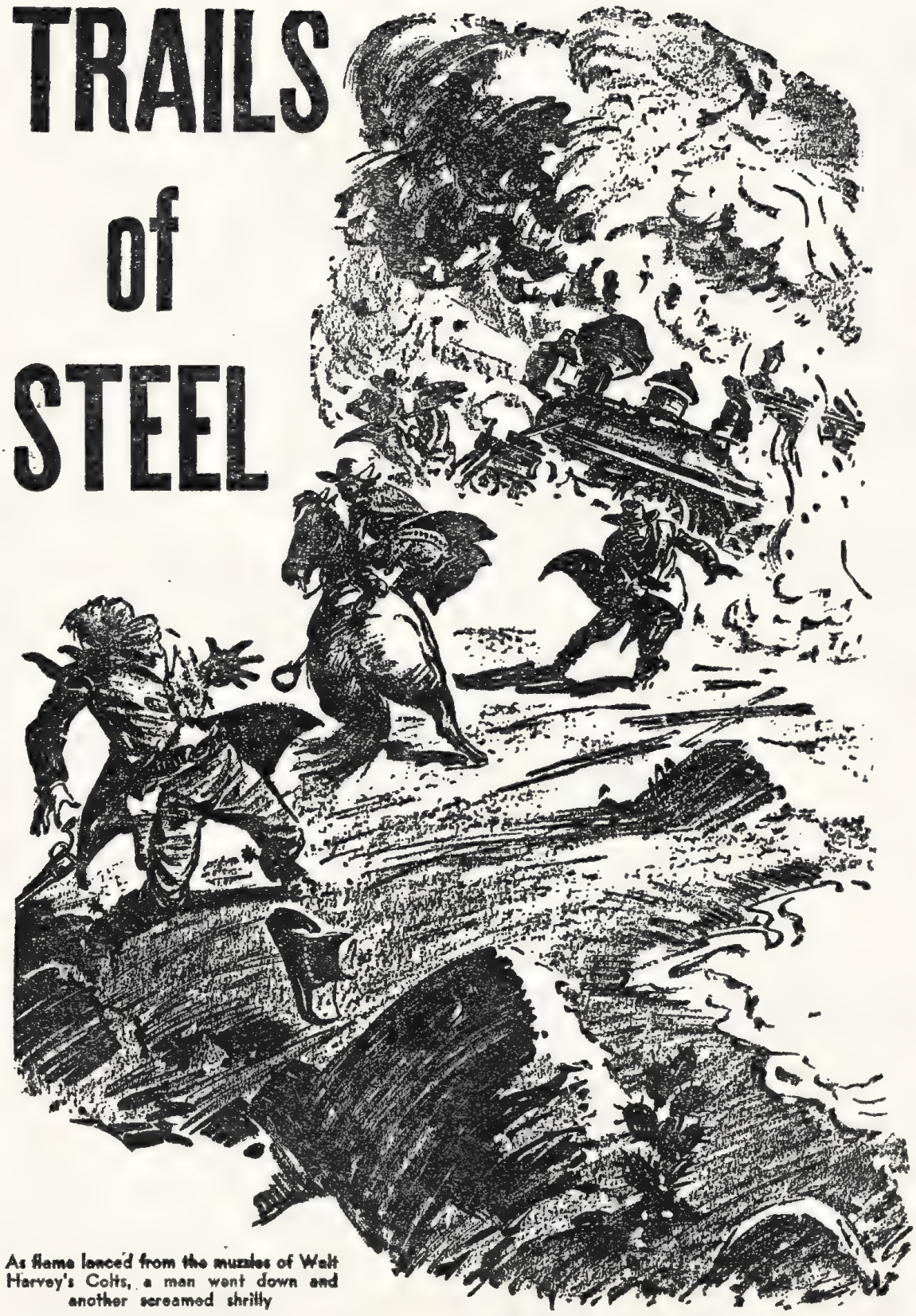
At last the Ralston Ring crumbled. "You boys smashed it with something deadlier than any brace of Colts," Sutro told the miners.

Afterwards, Sutro moved to San Francisco, the city that had been ruled and ruined by the Ralston Ring. The citizens elected him mayor. He gave them fine parks and schools, lowered street car and railroad fares. Although he retired as mayor after two years, he continued to help people by giving thousands of dollars to charity.

He died on August 8, 1898, at the age of sixty-eight, and people thronged from all over the West to his funeral. Somebody who visited his grave said:

"When I remember Adolph Sutro, I think that the Star of David and the Star of Bethlehem can't be too far apart in heaven."

TRAILS of STEEL



As flame lanced from the muzzles of Walt Harvey's Colts, a man went down and another screamed shrilly

A lot of men resented the coming of the railroad, and it didn't mean much to Walt Harvey—till the day they blasted a train he was riding!

A NOVEL BY A. LESLIE

I

NIGHT and a storm were rushing down from the Black Hell Hills. Lancing spears of rain, cold as melted icicles, stabbed through the gathering dark and hurtled across the rolling prairie land known as the Enchanted Mesa. Thunder rolled and fitful lightning etched the jumbled peaks of the hills clearly against the sky.

Inside the single coach of a work train that roared through the stormy night were fourteen passengers. Several Coronado gamblers, their long black coats crumpled from much sitting, talked in terse sentences through a haze of cigar smoke. A saloonkeeper, also from Coronado, slumbered fatly in his seat. There was an old desert rat who gazed placidly into the wild darkness beyond the windows. A number of miners sat grumpily side by side and said little.

On a seat near the middle of the car lounged a big-boned old man with a kindly face. He was well-dressed, Western style. And he had captured the interest of Walt Harvey, a tall young cowboy, who was slouched comfortably on a rear seat.

"Old jigger's a ranchman or I miss my guess," he mused. "Might be a job riding somewheres around his diggings,

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and I could sure use a job right now. Wish something would happen that'd give me a chance to talk to him."

Something did happen. Walt, glancing slantwise through a streaming windowpane, saw a particularly vivid flash split the night just ahead of the train, followed by a thunderclap strangely sharp and short, then the squeal of brake shoes grinding against the wheels.

Walt was hurled violently forward. He gripped the seat in front of him and braced himself as the car leaped and bucked.

"What the—" he began, as his voice was drowned by a splintering, bellowing roar. He was lifted, slammed and buffeted. He held onto the seat-back with all the strength of his slim, muscular hands.

THE car left the rails. Walt felt the sickening careen of it as the wheels buried themselves in the soft ground.

"She's going over!" he muttered.

She didn't, but she very largely went to pieces. The wooden center sills buckled and broke. The front vestibule took on the look of a plate of hash. Shattered timbers and broken glass flew in all directions. Several of the hanging lamps went out. One broke loose from its moorings and scattered flaming oil over the jumble of wreckage.

Somebody was screaming. It was the fat saloonkeeper, who was wedged between a couple of seats, unharmed but held tightly. The miners were bawling profanely. Walt caught a glimpse of the old ranchman lying on the sagging floor, a heavy beam across his chest.

Outside sounded a fusillade of shots and a thunderous battering. The window beside Walt had gone to smash. He stuck his head through the jagged opening. A lightning flash showed him several mounted men throwing themselves from their saddles beside the train. Two, already dismounted, were battering at the door of the car ahead with a heavy timber. Walt did not know it, but that dark car was the C. & P. paymaster's car with the Coronado payroll.

"Drop that log and get back there!" bellowed a voice above the clamor of the storm. Another lightning flash showed the two men running back from the car door. The others had already drawn off.

Then something sailed through the air, plainly visible in the light of the sparks trailing behind it. It struck the car door in a blinding blaze. There was a deafening crash. Light poured through the opening where the door had been.

Walt kicked the jagged fragments of glass loose and slid through the window feet first. He hit the sloppy ground, teetered, recovered his balance and crouched beside the car.

Flames were flickering over the wreckage. Suddenly they flared high, casting a lurid glow over the scene. The train wreckers were outlined boldly against the crowding dark.

Walt Harvey's long, black Colts slid from their holsters. Flame lanced from the muzzles the instant they cleared leather. A man went down. Another screamed shrilly and clutched at a blood-spouting shoulder. The air seemed to explode with the roar of six-shooters.

Hoofs suddenly drummed out of the night. A magnificent horse, black as the starless dark, raced along the length of the train. The rider, a shapeless blur in the smoky light, held a roaring gun in either hand. Under the hail of lead, men who were coming out of the coach, shooting as they came, ducked for cover. His voice, clear as a silver bell, rang above the tumult.

"Fork your broncs, you jugheads! Get going while there's anybody left to ride."

An angry bellow of protest answered him. But the next instant the surviving wreckers, including the one Walt had wounded, were in their saddles and thundering away through the dark.

Walt stuffed fresh cartridges into his guns and holstered them. He was soaked to the skin and shivering with cold, but the lancing raindrops felt good to the fever excitement had brought to his face.

Men were running toward him, bearing lanterns or hastily improvised torches. A lanky individual, wearing a conductor's cap, let out a shout.

"This is the feller what stopped 'em," he bawled. "I seen him do it. He dropped that one what's shot through the head and busted another one's shoulder. If it hadn't been for him, they'd of got the payroll, sure."

"Cowboy, when we get to Coronado, you come into my place and drink till

you bust," puffed the fat saloonkeeper. "I'm Sad Sam Sooner. Everybody in town knows Sad Sam's place—she's a ding-buster, if I do say so."

The coach was burning merrily. The former occupants huddled together in the rain, watching the fire gain in strength, cursing drearily. Walt ran his eyes over the little group and missed a face. "Say," he exclaimed, "where's that big old jigger that was laying on the floor—looked like a cowman? Anybody get him out?"

WALT HARVEY

Blank faces met the query. Men shuffled from one foot to the other and looked questions at one another but said nothing.

A gambler spoke up sharply. "I don't believe he got out."

"Christopher!" sputtered a miner. "He'll be burnt up!"

"Hey, where you going?" yelled the conductor.

Walt Harvey did not answer. He was already half-way through a smoke-spouting window. Another lunge and he tumbled onto the car floor, panting and gasping. He tried to stand, but the smoke and the heat beat him down again.

A gust of flame flared up and he saw the old rancher. He was lying in the aisle, the heavy beam still resting across his chest. He was conscious when Walt crawled across the littered floor to reach him, but could speak barely above a whisper. He raised a gnarled hand in feeble protest.

"Get out, son!" he gasped. "I'm done for—caught under this damn log. Can't move it. You'll get trapped and fried, too!"

"Take it easy, old-timer," Walt counseled, getting his hands under the beam.

With all the sinewy strength of his big body, he heaved and strained. One coat sleeve split from shoulder to wrist under the swell of mighty tendons, but the beam did not budge an inch.

"You can't move it!" panted the old man. "Get out—while there's still time!"

"I'll move it!" grunted Walt, sweat streaming down his face. "Take it easy!"

He began to wrench and tear at the wreckage, seeking something that would serve for a pry. His hands were scorched. His eyes burned. A hot iron band was slowly tightening about his chest.

WALT tore a length of stout railing free at last. Glowing embers on it stung his hands, but he merely batted them out. He thrust his pry under the beam, got a good grip and heaved.

The beam came up a couple of inches, enough to allow the rancher to roll weakly from beneath it. Then the old man went suddenly limp.

Walt sank to his knees, grasped the other's shoulders and shuffled backward, drawing the unconscious form with him. He raised the body to the ledge of the single window free from fire and heaved it through the opening with every last ounce of his remaining strength. Then gasping and panting, he sank back to the floor.

"Reckon the old jigger was part right, anyhow," he muttered. "I ain't gonna get out!"

He summoned reserve energy from his heat and smoke-drugged body, got his hands up to where he could grip the window ledge, but there his muscles refused to obey further orders from his brain.

He felt something clamp on his wrists then, as with a kind of dull fascination he saw the torrent of fire that enveloped the roof sag toward him, saw the burned beams loosen. Flaming death rushed down just as the heavy

hands that gripped his wrists pulled him up and through the window opening.

"I got him!" bawled the fat saloonkeeper. "Sad Sam Sooner ain't gonna let a good man get fried!"

The beat of rain on his face soon brought Walt Harvey around to normal. The rancher was already sitting up. A grin split his beard and he held out a big hand.

"Much obliged, son," he said. "Began to look like I wouldn't know the difference when I stepped onto the big hot spread down below. It was mighty fine of you to come back after me like you did."

They shook hands solemnly, the rancher noting with approval the steady gray eyes, lean jaw and wide, good-humored mouth of the cowboy. Walt smiled reply, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face.

"My coming back was plumb accident," he explained. "I left my hat on the seat and thought I had plenty of time to get it."

The rancher nodded. "Uh-huh," he remarked dryly, glancing at Walt's drenched black hair. "Reckon you better go back again. You sorta forgot it this time, too."

II

A MAN in a long coat came hurrying through the rain.

"Good evening, Mr. Banning," he greeted the rancher. "You and this young man had better come into the pay car with me, out of the wet. I have some salve that should be good for those burns."

Walt and Banning followed the paymaster into his car. He took them into his private compartment back of the brass grille. The other passengers made themselves as comfortable as possible in the outer section of the car.

"Rain is putting the fire out before it can spread, and the conductor has cut in on the wire," said the paymaster. "We'll have a wreck train here in another hour. Now, we'll smear this stuff on those blisters, and then we'll have some coffee."

Nearly two hours passed before the wreck train boomed around the curve from the west, however. With it came a sheriff's posse, who quickly decided they could do nothing until daylight.

"And by then the rain'll have washed all the hoof marks out," grunted the sheriff.

"Any idea who it was?" asked Walt.

"One guess is as good as another," said the sheriff. "The Black Hell Hills is full of all kinds of folks that don't want no railroad running through this territory. The jigger you tagged in the head ain't known hereabouts, anyway. I'd guess Clinch Buster might be in on it, but I doubt Clinch has enough brains to plan a job so well."

"One of 'em—the jigger that called 'em off—I'd know if I ever heard him yelp again," said Walt.

"He'll yelp plenty if I ever line sights on him, whoever he is," growled the sheriff. "Wonder how long it'll take the boys to get this mess off the tracks?"

The storm had howled itself out by morning and the sun was shining brightly when the wreck train pulled its string of disabled cars into the yards at Coronado. As he picked his way over the tracks in the wake of old John Banning. Walt decided that the town itself would look better after dark.

It was ugly with the ugliness of raw board shacks, garish false-fronted shops and saloons, and muddy, unpaved streets. High above it a lofty mountain reared its cool blue head. To the west and south the Black Hell Hills glowered, while to the north and east stretched the lovely rangeland of the Enchanted Mesa, which the Mexicans called La Mesa Encantada.

"My spread is up there," explained Banning, jerking a thumb to the north. "This town was built by the railroad. It's railroad headquarters and it's gonna be a divisicn point when the line is finished, There's some gold mining in them hills to the south, but it ain't never amounted to much. Cattle is the big thing in this country. Cattle and thieving."

"Thieving?"

"Uh-huh. Them hills is plum chocked with wideloopers and bandits. The Canyon Trail from Mexico runs this way. Smugglers and the like use it, and other hellions lay for the smugglers. Then there's the Garrochales cattle trail that the shipping herds has used to head east by. With the railroad coming through here, that trail won't be used much no more, which don't please the wideloop-

ers none. Most of the rustling in these parts has been along the Garrochales Trail. That's one of the reasons they hate to see the railroad come."

Banning paused before a squat building bearing the sign "Hotel."

"Son," he said, "you and me done had a plumb hard night. Me, I sure don't feel like heading for the ranch this morning. S'pose we get ourselves a little shut-eye. Then tonight I'd like to have a powwow with you. What say?"

"Suits me," agreed Walt. "My ear'll stand a little pounding right now."

IT was dusk when Walt awoke and returned to the street. The windows of the many saloons were yellow squares now. Through the swinging doors drifted brassy strains of music, the clatter of high heels and the thump of boots. Roulette wheels whirred. Cards slithered silkily. Dice clicked and danced over the green cloth.

"She's a salty pueblo, all right," Walt mused aloud. "Listen to them songs! The jiggers that's singing 'em never learned 'em in Sunday School, that's sure."

Old John Banning came clumping out of the hotel office.

"Hi, son," he greeted, then immediately led the way to a nearby restaurant.

Little was said until they had surrounded huge portions of ham and eggs and the last cup of coffee had vanished. Then they rolled cigarettes and talked.

"I take it you're a cowpoke just mavericking around?" observed Banning.

"Uh-huh," Walt nodded. "Took me a little ride over New Mexico and Texas way, then ambled back and headed south. My cayuse stepped in a badger hole and busted his leg. Had to shoot him. Then a feller told me they was some good spreads up this way, so I bought me a ticket for here. Had a good riding outfit, but I reckon it got burned up in the wreck."

"If you hadn't wasted so much time getting me out of that car, you might have saved it," commented Banning. "I got plenty hulls and bridles up to my place—the Triangle B," he added. "There's a horse and a job waiting there for you, too, if you can use 'em."

"I sort of like to eat regular," was Walt's acceptance of the offer. He shook his head as Banning put a hand in his pocket. "I got a few pesos left," he told the ranch owner. "Enough to last me till I draw a pay."

Banning left to attend to some business affairs, and Walt crossed the street to the hotel, fingering the two silver dollars remaining in his pocket.

"Reckon I'll have to enjoy myself some sort of mildlike tonight," he chuckled ruefully. "Been a long time since I had a chance to let my wolf loose in a real pueblo, too."

As he entered the hotel office he met Gavin, the C. & P. paymaster, who had dressed his burns the night before.

"Hello," said Gavin. "I've been looking for you. The Big Boss, the G.M., got into town today and heard about what you did last night. He told me to give you this."

He handed a stout envelope to the puncher. Walt tore it open, wonderingly, and fished out the contents. He gave a low whistle at the sight of the thick packet of bills. He whistled again after he had counted them.

"Two hundred pesos! Say, are you Mr. Santa Claus himself?"

"The G.M. said you earned it," smiled Gavin. "There was twenty thousand dollars in that payroll. By the way," he added, "Mr. Dunn would like to see you if you have the time to spare."

"I got all there is," said Walt. "You just lead the way."

They entered the railroad yards and picked their way across the network of tracks to a long green-and-gold coach that stood on a spur. The legend "Winona" lettered its sides in gold.

"This is the G.M.'s private car," said Gavin.

A few moments later, ushered into the plush inner sanctum of the general manager's car by an immaculate porter, Walt found himself face to face with the big, clear-eyed, snowy-haired man who was James G. Dunn, empire builder, known with pride and affection to the thousands of C. & P. employees as "Jaggers" Dunn.

"Have a chair, son," said Jaggers.

"About that two hundred dollars, sir," Walt began. "I don't think—"

"You more than earned it," interrupted Jaggers, "but that isn't why I sent it to you. Money can't pay for the sort of thing you did. Gavin told me you lost your riding outfit in the fire, so the

company is buying you a new one, that's all." Which was fair enough, Walt was forced to admit.

"That isn't what I want to talk to you about, though," said the G.M. "I understand you're out of a job at present. Well, this road can use men of your sort. I'll make a place for you if you care to take it."

Walt smiled at the G.M., but slowly shook his head.

"Mighty fine of you, sir," he said, "but Mr. Banning offered me a job riding and I took it. Reckon I sort of got saddle leather and such mixed up in my blood. I wouldn't be satisfied off the range."

Jaggers Dunn nodded. "Drop in and see me any time you feel like it," he invited. Chances are we will contact each other, anyway, if you're going to ride for Banning, since he has a contract to supply our camps with beef and also owns stock in the line. Meantime, good luck, boy."

WALT HARVEY walked back to town alone. He was pleased by the G.M.'s offer, even though he did not care to accept it. Also he now felt that he could take the two hundred dollars handed him. After all, his lost outfit had been worth pretty close to that.

"Ain't even got a hat left!" he chuckled, running his fingers through his mop of black hair. "But that can wait. Right now I crave a little entertainment."

He suddenly halted before the swinging doors of a saloon. A legend on the window had caught his eye.

"Sad Sam's Place," the sign read.

Walt chuckled again. "That fat feller is a sort of first-class hombre," he mused. "I figure he's got some of this dinero coming to him, too. I'll just amble in and plank some of it on his bar."

But Walt found trouble dividing his reward money with Sad Sam. In the first place, the bar was crowded three deep and it took quite a bit of shoving and squirming to get near it. In the second place, Sad Sam himself saw him coming. The fat saloonkeeper let out a wordless howl of joy and charged Walt like a long-lost brother.

"You can't buy a drink in here!" he bawled. "If you swaller a barrel, it's on the house. Drink up, gents, drink up! Sad Sam's buying in honor of the gamest hombre what ever leathered a gun."

Walt had a glass of whisky, with another for a chaser. He drank the third a little more slowly, glancing around the room, listening to the chatter of Sad Sam Sooner.

"She's sort of quiet right now," yelled Sad Sam above the uproar. "A little later in the evening she'll liven up a bit. 'Scuse me a minute, feller, I got to go over and see who that was 'Plowpoint' Astorbilt hit with a bungstarter."

Walt picked his way across the dance floor to where the gambling games were going full blast. He paused at a table where half a dozen silent players sat at a game of stud. The man directly opposite him raked in a big pot, glanced up and met the cowboy's gaze.

Walt's breath caught back of his teeth. Never in his life had he looked upon a face so startlingly handsome. From the curling hair of purest gold that swept back from the white forehead, to the square bronzed chin, the man's features were perfect. Yet his clear blue eyes were cold and bitter—sinister, somehow.

Then as a man quit the game and the handsome one rose to take the vacated seat, murmuring that the light bothered his eyes where he was, Walt saw something else. On the man's back was a hump, another on his chest. His legs were twisted and he moved around the table at a grotesque shamble, his long arms dangling to below his knees. A monstrous hunchback with the head and neck of a Greek god!

In a rush Walt Harvey understood the mystery of those embittered eyes. Aloud he said, "Open game, gents?"

"Shore," said a young cowboy with grin-crinkled eyes. "All the games in Sad Sam's is open so long as there's room at the tables."

Walt sat down opposite the hunchback. The play was steep, the players skilful. Walt knew poker and he quickly arrived at the conclusion that these men knew it too. The hunchback was reckless and lucky.

"Don't seem to care whether he wins or loses," mused Walt.

For a time Walt held his own. Then he began to lose steadily. The hunchback as steadily won. Walt was soon a hundred dollars behind. The hunchback's perfectly formed thin lips twisted in a sneer.

"We'll soon cut out the pikers and have a man's game," he said.

Walt Harvey said nothing, but a chill grew in his gray-green eyes.

Then on the next deal, with a five and six showing, Walt caught an eight spot, while the hunchback paired kings. There were no other pairs in sight.

"Reckon that busts up your little straight," the hunchback jeered, and shoved fifty dollars into the pot.

The next four players dropped quickly. "I ain't bucking no two kings," said one. "I'm turning down a pair of jacks and don't care who knows it." The others nodded their heads in agreement. Walt Harvey glanced at his hole card.

"Believe I'm gonna be lucky," he drawled. "I'll see that fifty."

III

THE hunchback, who was dealing, gripped the deck and flipped the cards expertly. Then he glared at the seven of hearts he had dealt his opponent. Walt's straight was filled—in sight.

"Didn't I tell you I was gonna be lucky?" said the tall cowboy. "You cheek?" He grinned and shoved the last of his two hundred dollars into the pot. "It'll cost you just thirty-five pesos more to see me."

The hunchback hurled his cards aside with a curse. "Curse a man with the luck to fill an inside straight in a stud game!" he swore between his teeth.

Walt Harvey laughed, but without mirth.

"There's all kinds of luck," he said softly, "and some a man makes for himself."

He flipped over his hole card and showed the deuce of hearts. His hand had been worthless. Either of the hunchback's kings alone had had him beat.

A roar of laughter shook the poker table. The players slapped their thighs. Onlookers joined in the mirth as Walt pocketed his easy winnings.

The hunchback's face was paper-white. His rage seemed to kindle an insane light in his eyes, and suddenly it burst all restraint and he went for his gun. At the same instant Walt Harvey's big Colts slid from their sheaths.

Over went the poker table, cards and money flying in all directions. Then, seemingly from out of nowhere, a big, bony old man slammed between Walt and the hunchback, a gnarled hand on the breast of each.

"Stop it!" he thundered. "Ain't there enough trouble in this country right now without you young roosters spurring each other over a fool game of cards? Both of you are acting like a couple of kids."

Rather shamefacedly the two holstered their guns. Sad Sam Sooner came hurrying forward with conciliatory words.

A surprising thing happened, then.

The hunchback turned to Walt. "Feller," he said. "I just naturally hate your innards, and some time I'm gonna blow 'em clean around your backbone, but I apologize for being a poor loser. I'll be looking for a better excuse to gun you, next time." He turned to the old man. "Come on, let's be getting out of here."

Walt stared after them as they passed through the swinging doors.

"Who is that crooked-backed jigger?" he asked Sad Sam.

"Name's Rance Darnley," replied Sooner. "The old feller's his uncle, Clinch Buster. Clinch owns the Circle Bar. Rance is his foreman."

YOUNG Walt Harvey found the Triangle B, John Banning's spread, to be a big and prosperous ranch. The buildings were in good repair, the cattle sleek and fat.

"Yeah, she's a good range," Banning admitted. "But son," he confided, "she's mortgaged up to the hilt. You see, the cattlemen hereabouts—at least some of 'em—persuaded the C. & P. to build this new line through the Black Hell Hills. We bought stock heavy to finance the project, and if the line don't get through we stand to lose just about everything we got."

"There's no chance of it not getting through, is there?" Walt asked.

"There's a plumb good chance," Banning replied gloomily. "Lots of folks in this section is sot agin it. Some of the honest cattlemen figger it'll be a bad thing instead of a good one, figuring the engines will stampede cattle, that sparks from 'em will cause prairie fires, and one thing and another. Them fellers won't do anything but talk against it, of course, but there's plenty others that won't stop at anything. What you saw the other night is a sample."

"You mean they'll wreck trains and such?"

"That's just what I do mean," declared Banning. "Fellers like Clinch Buster won't stop at anything, to say nothing of the owlhoots that live back in the Black Hell Hills and don't want no railroad or anything else that might bust up their stamping grounds."

"Clinch Buster," mused Walt. "He's a sorta salty hombre, eh?"

"Yeah, but that nephew of his, Rance Darnley, is worse," Banning volunteered. "Clinch fights fair and is honest, according to his own lights. Darnley fights any way what comes to hand and he's got the same sort of morals as a hyderphobia skunk. He showed up here to be Clinch's foreman about a year ago, and since then he's been weeding out the old hands Clinch had and filling their places with hellions of his own sort. I wouldn't put anything past Darnley."

Pete Goyner, the Triangle B foreman, watched Walt ride and rope for a couple of days. "Top-hand," was Pete's comment, and called the tall puncher to him.

"See them hills down there, Harvey?" he asked, jerking his thumb toward the southwest. "Them is the Black Hell Hills. We got plenty cattle in there, but the hills is all cut up with canyons and draws and little hid-away valleys that have got good water and grass in 'em. The dogies drift in there and stay and get fat. Combing 'em out is a top-hand job. I got several of the boys working at it now, but they need help. I'm putting you on that job, too. We need them beefs bad to fill up our railroad camp orders. Get going, feller."

Walt got going. He speedily realized that Goyner had not been talking through his hat when he said combing cattle out of the Black Hell brakes was a top-hand job, but he proceeded to justify Goyner's confidence.

"He's sure a ding-buster," said the lanky foreman to old John. "You didn't make no mistake when you picked him out."

"I figured that when he picked me out of that darn bonfire," grunted Banning.

Walt was working far back into the hills one afternoon a week later, when the crackling screech of a high-power rifle bullet over his head told him he was not alone. He ducked instinctively, and a second slug whipped through the space his head had occupied the instant before.

"What the devil?" he barked, glancing back the way he had come.

Men were riding down the steep side of the valley, shooting as they came. A bullet twitched at Walt's sleeve. Another shifted his hat on his head.

"Get going, you jughead!" he yelled to his cayuse. "You and me has got business elsewhere."

Up the narrowing valley he raced, snuggled low on his horse's neck as the bullets whined about him.

"Why the heck didn't I bring a long gun with me," he wailed. "Sixes ain't no good against rifles. Travel, hoss!"

The horse traveled, but he had covered many miles already that day and the pursuers were freshly mounted. They gained steadily. Twisting in the saddle, Walt caught a glimpse of a big man mounted on a tall pinto. Behind him were six or seven more riders.

Glancing at the sparsely wooded sides of the valley, Walt wished he dared turn aside and seek concealment among the trees, but quickly decided against it.

" 'Fore I'd reach the trees they'd gain so much they'd blow me out of the hull," he muttered.

His eye caught a flicker of movement among the trees paralleling him. "Gosh, it looks like some of 'em is in front, too," he breathed. "If they are, I'm sure enough a goner."

The horse under him screamed shrilly then and went down in a plunging fall, hurling Walt over his head. The cowboy struck in a rolling sprawl, the breath knocked out of him, red flashes storming before his eyes. He could hear the triumphant yells of the pursuers.

GASPING, he struggled to his knees and jerked his Colts. He slewed about at the sound of hoofs crashing down the valley side toward him. Before he could fire, the horse was upon him.

"Up!" called a clear voice. "Up behind me! Hurry! Hurry!"

Walt was too bewildered to argue. He had just sense enough left in his whirling head to obey. He slammed the Colts back into their sheaths and clambered up behind the girl who sat a plunging horse beside him.

"Hold tight!" she screamed, and away they went.

The pursuers had gained tremendously, but the big black the girl bestrode was fresh and strong. Even with the double burden, he held his own.

Walt's head was clearing, his strength coming back. He could see nothing of his rescuer but the curve of a creamily tanned cheek and a cluster of wind-whipped dark curls flying back under the wide brim of her hat.

The valley floor began to slope sharply upward. The toiling horse with his double load was making hard going of it. Walt grimly loosened his guns in their holsters, and shifted his weight slightly.

"There ain't no sense of letting this game little gal in for trouble," he told himself. "Next bunch of trees, I'll just drop off and give them jiggers something to think about. Maybe I can hold 'em long enough to give her a head start."

They topped a rise, raced across a level stretch and suddenly the girl was dragging back on the bridle with all her strength.

The black horse faltered, stumbled, dug his hoofs into the ground and slid to a snorting halt not a foot short of a sheer drop of perpendicular rock wall. Fifty feet below, water foamed and boiled over glistening fangs of stone while from behind the crash of hoofs and the yells of the pursuers grew ever closer.

The valley had ended in a straight-walled canyon. Less than two hundred yards to left and right reared frowning cliffs. Ahead was a wide gorge through which roared a rushing stream. There was not a trace of shelter or concealment.

The girl turned a white little face to Walt. The cowboy saw that her eyes were wide and darkly blue, with astonishingly long and thick black lashes. She was small and slight, with a deliciously rounded little figure.

"They—they've got us," she said falteringly.

"Not yet they haven't," Walt growled, jamming his guns tight in their holsters. Then, plucking her from the saddle, he swung to the ground as the first of the yelling pursuers topped the rise.

Calmly, as if death were not blazing at him from behind or facing him in front, Walt stepped to the brink of the chasm. He glanced at a smooth pool in the water below, estimating its depth, and then his arms tightened about the girl's slight form and he took a brief running leap into space.

Barely missing an upthrust of wet rock, they struck the water and vanished with a sullen plunge. Down into the cold, greenish depths they went.

His ears roaring, his heart pounding his chest with hammer blows, Walt had about despaired of ever rising again, when the current caught him and hurled him to the surface. He broke water, gasping and sputtering, the girl still gripped tightly in his arms. He felt the inrush of her straining breath, saw that her wide blue eyes were open. Her face was dead white, but she flashed him a smile.

"You're game," he muttered.

"Let—me place my hands on your shoulders. It will be easier that way," gasped the girl.

"Water's too rough," Walt grunted back. "I'm afraid you might get tore loose."

The stream ran like a mill race between smooth black walls of overhanging rock, and they were whisked quickly out of sight of the pursuers who had reached the cliff edge.

Walt realized that something would have to be done quickly. The water was numbingly cold, and the task of fighting the vicious current and protecting his companion at the same time was too much for even his work-hardened muscles. His limbs were growing leaden.

"Let me go," the girl urged quietly. "You can't save us both. There is no sense in you being drowned, too."

"No more sense than in you picking me up off the ground back there," Walt growled.

IV

AS they swept around a bend, a turbulent cross-current seized them in its giant arms and hurled them like straws toward one wall that had a ledge running along it for as far as the eye could see. It was about six feet above the waterline, however, and with no way to reach it over the smooth wall. They crashed into the slick-sided stone with a force that jarred every bone in Walt's body. He shielded the girl from the impact as best he could.

The current whirled them, bumping

and scraping along. Walt flung out a despairing arm and hooked his fingers in a crack in the face of the stone. Grimly he held on, while the water smashed and buffeted him.

"Get your arms around my neck and hang on," he told the girl fiercely.

With the freed hand he reached up and got his fingers in another cleft. Then a knob of stone afforded a third hold. Muscles standing out like ropes, he went up the six feet of seamed and mottled stone. A final mighty effort and he sprawled over the edge, dragging his clinging burden with him.

For a long time they lay on the level rock, the life all but out of them. Finally Walt struggled to his knees, lifted the girl and got to his feet with her.

"I think I can make out all right now," she said, smiling up at his anxious gaze.

Walt put her down reluctantly. She weaved on her feet for a moment and then seemed to regain her strength.

"Anyhow, we're out of the water," she said.

"Yeah, we're that, anyhow," Walt agreed, doubtfully eyeing the ledge. "S'pose we amble along a bit and see where this wolf trail takes us to."

It took them nearly two miles through the gloomy gorge before it sluffed off against the side of a tall cliff and they had to take to the water again. The stream was wider here, the current much weaker, and as they were carried slowly around the next bend, they found themselves abruptly out of the gorge and this time had no trouble making land.

The girl glanced up at the lofty hills that fell back from the river, a perplexed line between her dark brows. Suddenly the line smoothed out and she laughed happily, showing little white teeth. Walt just stood and looked at her, thinking that she was prettier than a palomino colt, even.

"I know!" she exclaimed. "I recognize those hills on the left. We're only a few miles from my grandfather's ranch house."

"I'm sure glad to hear that," said Walt. "You reckon your grandpa has got anything to eat in his diggings? My stomach keeps telling me my thoat's cut or stopped up or something." The young cowman was laughing.

"I imagine he'll be able to corral a bite for us," smiled the girl. "We'll turn to the left here."

Walt glanced down at her shapely little head and the dark hair which was drying in tight little curls.

"Ma'am," he said, "there's something I'd sorta of like to know—just what does your grandpa call you when he wants you?"

"You'd be surprised," replied the girl, "especially if it happens to be one of the times he wants me in a hurry and can't locate me. But my name is Karma Hunter. What's yours?"

Five miles over rough and hilly country is quite a step for high-heeled boots. It was well past dark when, tired and limping, they climbed some low steps and crossed a wide ranch-house veranda. In the lighted hall a big, raw-boned old man met them.

"Karma, what in tarnation—" he began.

"Grandpa, this is Mr. Harvey," she said.

"Howdy, Mr. Buster," said Walt.

Old Clinch Buster squinted his keen eyes at Walt.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "You're the young rooster that was primed for a spurring that night in Sad Sam's place, a couple of weeks back. Didn't recognize you at first."

"You know each other?" asked the girl.

"Sorta of," replied old Clinch, while Walt grinned. "Ain't it kind of late in the season to be going swimming?" he asked, with a glance at their clothes. "Or did you get caught in a private rainstorm?"

Karma chattered explanations as old Clinch led them into the big main room of the ranch house, where a fire of logs burned on a wide hearth.

"Young people is allus gittin' themselves into ruckuses these days," he growled. "Well, reckon you both acted proper, under the circumstances. Come upstairs and I'll lend you some dry clothes and then we'll surround some chuck."

WALT noticed two vacant places at the table when they sat down, but before the meal was well under way, hoofs sounded outside and a moment later the two missing men entered the dining room. One was tall and bony, with hard eyes and a thin-lipped

mouth. He nodded to Clinch Buster and Karma, stared at Walt.

"Harvey, meet Tol Douglass, one of my top hands," said Buster. "Tol is sort of assistant foreman on this spread."

The man behind Douglas sidled forward and Walt looked into the startlingly handsome face of the hunchback he'd nearly traded lead with in Sad Sam's saloon.

"Reckon you and my nephew here remember each other, but I'll just make you formally acquainted," old Clinch Buster went on. "Rance Darnley, foreman of the Circle Bar, get to know Walt Harvey, who works for John Banning. Him and your cousin Karma had kind of a interesting time of it together this afternoon, Rance. Tell 'em about it, Karma."

The two young men nodded stiffly to each other. Darnley and Douglass sat down. The girl, unaware of the tension, began to recount the afternoon's adventure.

Tol Douglass stared hard at her as she spoke. Darnley's eyes narrowed to slits. His face was pasty white as the girl told of the awesome leap into the gorge.

"Some day I'll get a crew together and comb them hellions out of the hills and make cottonwood apples of 'em!" rumbled Clinch Buster.

After eating, they left the dining room for the big living room. Old Clinch clumped off to bed after a gruff "good night." Douglass made some excuse and left. The girl turned to Darnley, who was staring moodily into the fire.

"Play for us, Rance," she urged, "and sing."

The hunchback glanced at her, his blue eyes smoldering. For an instant he hesitated, as if on the point of refusing. Then he sidled across the room to where stood a great dark piano. His slim fingers wandered across the keys, and mellow, golden notes filled the big room.

Then, pure and true as the silvery tones of the piano, rang a voice like to bugle echoes at dawn. For God, who had denied Rance Darnley so much, had given him the golden gift of song.

When the slim hands finally dropped from the age-mellowed keys, Rance Darnley turned from the piano to the silent, enraptured hearers, and in his strange eyes there was a kind of peace that Walt had never seen in them before.

But as his gaze fell upon the tall cowboy standing beside the girl, hate blazed again in his eyes and made of his godlike beauty a hideous thing. Without a word he rose and sidled, grotesque and crablike, across the room and out into the star-lighted dark.

The next morning a wrangler brought a saddled and bridled horse to the veranda steps. Clinch Buster walked beside the horse to the ranch-house yard gate. Walt turned for a last glance at the slim little figure standing at the edge of the porch, the morning sunlight striking glints in her dark curls. She waved a slender little hand in good-by.

"Don't go swimming any more, Mr.—Walt."

"I won't, by myself, Miss—Karma."

Buster opened the gate. "You can send the outfit back when convenient—no hurry. John Banning is crazy as a coot, but he's good to horses. Pity he had to go and get doddering in his old age."

Walt bent his level gray gaze on Buster. "When I work for a man, I'd rather not hear people speak slightinglike about him," he said quietly.

Old Clinch nodded approvingly. "Uh-huh, that's the way I like to have my men feel about me. Well, so-long, son. Take care of yourself."

RIDING slowly away from the ranch house, Walt was passing a horse corral when something caught his eye. He abruptly pulled his bronc to a halt and sat staring across the corral bars.

Among the horses contentedly munching hay was a tall pinto of peculiar marking. Walt had seen that paint pony before, and of late. Suddenly it came to him—that pinto was the mount of the man who had led his pursuers the day before. A remembered vision of the man swam before his eyes, too.

"Uh-huh," he muttered, "big, rawboned, wide-shouldered. Looks a lot like old Clinch himself, a little ways off. But it wasn't Clinch. Nope, the jigger what forked that horse was the squint-eyed sidewinder I met last night—Tol Douglass! Now where was his sidekick, I wonder? He was back of it, all right. I thought it was sort of funny that a outlaw pack would waste all that time and hard work chasing a lonesome cow-

poke who wouldn't have the price of a poke of fine-cut in his jeans.

"No wonder them two looked sick when Karma was talking last night. Wasn't none of 'em close enough to recognize her when we took that jump. Well, now I'll know enough to expect anything from that pair of horned toads."

Walt rode first to the narrow valley and retrieved his saddle.

"Would be sort of funny if they figured I'd do this and was laying for me," he mused.

However, nothing happened and he was safe back at the Triangle B ranch house before dark. He found old John in a vicious temper.

"The new bridge across Coyote Creek," the rancher explained. "They blowed it up with dynamite. Will take weeks to straighten things up and cost thousands of dollars."

"Any idea who did it?"

"Nope. There was a watchman at the bridge. They found what was left of him—shot in the back. Horse tracks led back into the hills and petered out on the rocks. Same outfit that's been making all the trouble, it looks like, but nobody's sure just who they are."

Walt was thoughtful. "I'd sure know the gent that gave orders that night, if I ever heard him yelp again," he said. "He had a voice like a big horn."

Walt was put in charge of a crew to drive trail herds to the huge railroad construction camp southwest of Coronado and his prompt delivery of beef in the following weeks, despite repeated attempts by wideloopers to rustle his herds, won him respect on all sides. Jaggers Dunn was particularly loud in his praise of the tall cowboy, again lamenting the fact that the railroad lost one mighty good man when Walt Harvey decided to stick to the cow business.

Meanwhile, the C. & P. continued to lay track. On and on into the hills thrust the steel fingers, fighting the cold stubbornness of nature and the hot enmity of men. The grim canyons and ridges attacked the workers with slides and avalanches and unexpected falls and barriers. The outlaws of the gorges and the hole-in-the-wall valleys used hot lead and cold steel and dynamite and flame.

Another bridge went down. A tunnel caved in for no apparent reason. A section of the construction camp was burned one night. Bullets whined down from the hills. Workers who visited Coronado found themselves embroiled in senseless fights where knives flashed and guns blazed.

A grass fire swept a stretch of Clinch Buster's range and sent the old cattleman storming to Jaggers Dunn. The G.M. gave him scant satisfaction and pointed out that no engines had passed over that portion of the line for hours prior to the fire, and that something more sinister than chance sparks was responsible for the blaze. Buster left the camp, fuming and unconvinced. Money trouble at one of the land banks, wherein old Clinch wielded much influence immediately followed.

But Jaggers Dunn set his big jaw and, a fighting light in his cold blue eyes, continued to build railroad. He was forced, however, to go to Banning and other stockholders with the money problem.

"I run the C. & P. railroad, but I don't own it," Jaggers explained to the cattlemen. "If the thousands of stockholders who do own it vote more money to complete this line, they'll insist on taking over the line. They may vote against what they will term throwing good money after bad. If they do that and you boys can't raise the needed sums, the line will be abandoned. If they do vote it, you lose control and what you put into the line. That's the way the situation stands."

Old John Banning, spokesman for the cattlemen, nodded gravely.

"Yeah, we understand," he replied. "It's up to us to do what we can, but unless something like a miracle happens, I ain't got much hope."

V

MEANWHILE the little red gods of the wind and the rain and the big open spaces, who have a seeming kindness in their hearts for men with nerve and the willingness to take a chance, decided to step in and provide the miracle, although nobody at first recognized it as such.

To the southwest of where the new line swept in a great curve around the beetling buttresses of the Black Hell, was a range of gaunt, unlovely hills.

Trees would not grow on their dusty slopes. There was little water and scant grass. Their slopes were a dreary jumble of greasewood, cactus and giant boulders. Poverty hills, they were, with nothing about them to attract more than a casual glance.

A casual glance was all they received throughout the centuries. The red man avoided them. The Spaniards, in their northward quest for fabled treasure, turned aside. Miners, cattlemen, settlers—all showed not the slightest interest in that sinister fastness.

And yet those gaunt somber hills were a treasure house richer than the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola that the great adventurer, Coronado, sought. Those hills were bursting with silver. They were ready and waiting for the pick of the miner, for a single charge of blasting powder. But the slow years passed them by and still they lay, a leprous blotch on the land. It took a wandering desert rat, lost and starving, to scratch the unpromising surface and lay bare the uncounted riches.

In the late fall, while the new railroad struggled with its despairing problems and the progressive cattlemen of the Enchanted Mesa visioned the specter of grim failure, a man staggered into Coronado, holding onto his hunger-ribbed burro for support. A kindly cowboy bought him a drink and a meal, and by so doing, unwittingly laid the foundation of a fortune, for the desert rat did not forget.

After eating until he could hold no more, the old man asked the way to the nearest assayer's office. He tumbled his specimens on the assayer's bench and watched while the assayer, wild-eyed and trembling, made his tests.

"Astounding! Tremendous!" gasped the assayer at last. "Richer than the Comstock! Richer than anything Gold Hill or Virginia City ever had to show! Where did you get it? Is there more? Is the ledge workable?"

The dreams back again in his faded blue eyes, the desert rat left the assayer's office and gazed toward those somber hills to the southwest. He glanced about at the bustling construction town and laughed.

"This ain't nothing!" he chuckled. "This ain't a smidgeon to the town I'm gonna build! Yeah, I'm gonna build me a town down by them hills, and I'm gonna call her 'Busted.' 'Cause if anybody ever was busted when I picked up them there pieces of rock, it was me. Busted she is."

Busted she was. A rip-snortin', rootin'-tootin' boom town where the keys were thrown away and the sun never found time to go down. From Coronado, from Tucson, from Tombstone, from other towns far beyond the territory's borders, streamed the hordes. There was plenty for all. Mine after mine was opened in those gloomy hills. By mule back, burro pack, wagon train came the men, the women, the goods and the machinery.

Men cursed the slowness of it all, grew frantic with the delay. The sprawling, brawling, thundering town howled for supplies, for luxuries, for something upon which to spend the riches the hills were pouring forth.

"The line's got to turn and go that way," Jaggers Dunn told the stockholders.

"It'll take money, scads of money, to build them miles and miles around the hills," despaired John Banning.

"I know it," admitted the G.M. "It's the chance of a lifetime for you fellows, if you can just get the money together. But you'll have to move fast. They're already raising the devil back East. I cant' hold 'em off much longer."

"We understand, Dunn," said old John. "You're a square shooter and you've been more than fair by us. We don't hold nothing against you, personal."

"If there only was some sort of a short cut down there!" wailed another old cattleman. "It ain't no distance at all, straight across the hills."

"I know it isn't," said Jaggers. "The Lord only knows I've tried to find one. You can't go over those hills and you can't cut through them without having the United States Treasury to draw on. There's only one slash through them, and we can't even run a survey line along that. If there was any way to lay tracks through Shadow Canyon, the thing would be a joke."

HAVING delivered a herd to the construction camp, Walt Harvey sought Jaggers Dunn out and found him atop a tall cliff that formed one of the "gate posts" to a mighty gorge through which foamed roaring black water. Jag-

gers was in a talkative mood.

"I feel like this canyon is making a prize chump of me," he said. "Here it is, an almost straight shoot through the hills to those silver mines, the only possible pass, and not the least good to us."

"Why not?" Walt asked.

"Because," said Jaggers, "we can't even get into it to run a survey line and ascertain if it is a practical route."

"Why not use a boat and follow the creek?" asked Walt.

Jaggers snorted. "We tried it, and never saw or heard again of the men in the boat. Listen! Hear that roaring? That's a fall somewhere not far inside the mouth. From the sound of it, it's mighty high. No boat could go over it and live."

"Why not let a man down on a line from up here?"

"Too high," said Jaggers. "We found only one place where that was possible. There's a queer formation a few miles downstream. A narrow valley cuts right through the canyon walls and across it. Not much more than fifty feet down to the water there. We let a man down, and he found he was right at the bulge of a double curve. The sides there are sheer and there is no way to tell how far they extend that way. May extend the whole length of the canyon, for all we know. It's utterly impossible to row upstream from below."

Walt Harvey's eyes narrowed with interest. "You say there's a break in the wall where a valley cuts across it? Is by any chance the cliff on one side a red one and the other one black?"

"That's the place," replied Jaggers. "What do you know about it?"

Walt did not answer the question. Instead he asked one of his own.

"Mr. Dunn," he said, "I'm not an engineer or a railroad builder, but if there was room for a roadbed alongside the creek in that canyon, except for a few hundred yards at each end and maybe a break here and there along the way, would it be practical to blast out a roadbed in them sections and build through?"

"It would," replied Jaggers decisively. "It would be costly, but worth the cost. However, we can't afford to blast long stretches of cliff just on the chance that there is a way through we can't see. We have to run a survey line first."

Walt nodded, thoughtfully. Together they walked down the long slope and stood on the bank where the stream entered the gorge. The deep water filled the cleft from wall to wall. From inside the gloomy canyon, somewhere around the bend, came the faint roar of the falls.

For some time Walt stood thoughtfully eyeing the rushing flood.

"Something funny about this creek," he mused. "There ain't near as much water down where the little gal and me jumped in as there is up here. Where does it go?"

Jagger Dunn's voice broke in on his meditations. "It would certainly be the saving of Banning and those cattlemen if we could find a short cut to the mines," said the G.M.

That statement kept ringing in Walt Harvey's head as he rode home to the Triangle B and observed old John's tired, lined face. It rang all through the night, and when morning came it had given birth to inspiration and resolution. Walt had a plan—a daring, utterly reckless and, on the face of it, decidedly foolish plan. But he got busy on it without delay.

His bronc carried a queer load to the narrow valley which slashed across Shadow Canyon that morning. Walt cached the load and rode back toward the Triangle B. He needed help in his undertaking and was wondering whom he would ask, when chance stepped in, where his route crossed the Garrochales Trail, to decide the issue for him.

DARK curls tossing back from her piquant little face, blue eyes alight with laughter and the joy of life, Karma Hunter swept around the bend at a gallop, pulled her golden sorrel to a halt and greeted him gaily. Walt, after a few moments' idle chatter, impulsively told her what he intended doing. Her eyes widened with interest, then darkened with a hint of something very like terror as he unfolded his plan.

"But—but isn't it terribly dangerous?" she faltered.

"Nah," Walt deprecated, "especially if I have somebody I can depend on to help me. I was wondering which one of the boys to ask."

Her voice interrupted him. "You'll ask none of the boys to help you. If anybody helps you, it's going to be me. Don't argue now. It's all settled."

"But what'll your grandpa say?" Walt asked. "He's dead set against the railroad getting through."

"Oh, Grandpa is always dead set against something!" she exclaimed with an impatient toss of her curly head. "Also, he can do the quickest about-face of anybody I know. Once he realizes that the railroad is a good thing for the country instead of a bad one, as he now considers it, he will be the strongest booster for it. You just watch and see."

"I sure hope you're right," said Walt.

"I am right," she stated emphatically. "I'll be ready for you in the morning. Yes, I know where I can get a bow and arrows, and I know how to use them."

Silver spears of sunlight were just thrusting over the eastern peaks when Walt arrived at the slash in the walls of Shadow Canyon the next day. Early as he was Karma Hunter was there ahead of him. She sat her sorrel horse on the far side of the gorge. Her voice could not be heard above the roar of the water, but she waved her hand at him and quickly got to work.

Slim and supple, she stood on the very edge of the gorge, bending the six-foot stave of an Indian war bow. Then the taut cord hummed and an arrow sped across the gorge, trailing a length of spidery thread behind.

The arrow fell to the ground but a few feet from Walt's hand. He drew the dangling thread across with care. To the thread was attached a thin cord. To this a still stouter cord and to the second cord a slim, steely-strong rope. Soon, with the girl's help, the rope dangled down either face of the gorge walls in a great loop that writhed and tossed in the foaming water. They made the ends fast to stout tree trunks.

Then, remounting his horse, Walt waved his hand to the girl and rode swiftly toward the northern mouth of the valley. The girl sat down under a tree and resigned herself to a long and tedious wait, but a haunting anxiety was in her wide eyes and her red lips moved from time to time as if in prayer.

By mid-morning Walt pulled rein at the point where Shadow Creek plunged into the dark gorge that had provoked its name. He unsaddled his horse and turned him loose, knowing the animal would not stray far from the lush graze nearby. Boots, chaps and hat went into the saddlebags which he then carefully hid along with the rest of his riding outfit. He stood clad only in thin, close-fitting shirt and trousers. Soft, light moccasins protected his feet from stones.

"Well, if I made it through that first time in boots and guns and chaps, I sure ought to make it in this outfit," he assured himself. A moment later he slipped into the rushing waters of Shadow Creek.

The current was even stronger here in the upper reaches than farther downstream. The water seemed colder, too. It gripped him with icy fingers, hurling him toward where it frothed around the bend. Above, the tall heads of the cliffs overhung until he was shrouded in a greenish twilight. He swam strongly, bearing away from the dangerous cliff, rounded the long turn safely and in an instant was fighting frantically for his life.

"And so that's where the extra water goes!" he gasped. "No wonder they never saw nothing of that boat!"

VI

REARING high in mid-stream, a black ledge of rock divided the creek neatly in two. One half rushed hissing along the rock wall, which had already shelved back in a level bench like that below where Walt and the girl had leaped. The other half diagonaled to the right and plunged sheer into a yawning fissure, from the unplumbed depths of which rose an ominous roaring.

The current drove toward this latter with terrific power. Over its dark brink, the stream slipped with oily smoothness. Walt felt as if he were caught in a giant's grip which hurled him relentlessly toward that black gulf dropping into the bowels of the earth. The beetling dividing ledge rushed toward him and he was borne ever more and more to the right.

Madly he fought, with all the strength in his tough, young body. His breath came in great panting gasps. His limbs, numbed by the icy bite of the water, were leaden. His movements seemed despairingly slow and awkward.

"Hope the little gal don't wait too long!" he chattered between clicking teeth. "Here we go!"

Directly ahead loomed the knife-edge of the ledge. He reached it, traveling at dizzy speed, grazed the sharp protruding fang and went sliding and wallowing along the smooth stone.

With a mighty gasp of relief he then realized he had missed the ghastly death plunge by scant inches and was on the left side of the reef. A moment later the awful roaring was behind him, swiftly receding, and he was rushing along between towering stone walls, the familiar level bench hugging the water edge as it did farther down the stream.

"It's a go!" he cried exultantly. "All they got to do is blast away a few sections of rock and lay rails and ties right on that bench. They won't even hardly need to ballast. Road-bed is just made to order. Now all I got to do is not miss that rope the little lady's watching down below, which should be easy as falling off a greased pig backward."

So it seemed at the moment, but very soon afterward, when rock-fanged white water loomed ahead, he was again fighting for his life. Bruised, bleeding, the strength all but battered out of him, he cleared the rapids and was sucked under by a whirlpool that nearly drowned him before he managed to break surface.

It seemed to Walt that he had been in the water for hours. He was cold, numb, and deathly tired. He kept craning his neck to glance ahead, but all that met his straining gaze were the frowning black walls and the shrouding greenish twilight.

"Getting awful sleepy," he mumbled. "Wonder why it's so dark? I—"

His head went under, he swallowed water, gasped and strangled. The shock brought him alive for a moment and just as he was again sinking into the numbing depths of drowsiness, sunlight blazed ahead. He had reached the spot where the valley slashed across Shadow Canyon.

His eyes, blinded by the glare of the sun, didn't spot the rope until it was tossing almost under his hand. He grabbed at it, missed, grabbed again and snared it with two fingers.

The mighty drag of the current almost jerked his arm from the socket, but he held on and managed to get his body in the loop of the rope. For several minutes he hung there, resting. Then he slowly drew himself along the rope, hand over hand.

He reached the smooth wall, and rested again. Then he began the appalling climb up the sheer face of the cliff. Above, the girl encouraged him with voice and gesture.

It seemed to him that he made not the slightest progress, that the water still tugged at his feet. Inch by inch he went, and then finally the lip of the cliff was within hand's grasp.

He flung up an arm, clutching, gripping, but his fingers slipped and he sagged back. Then a slim little hand caught his wrist and held. His weight dragged the girl toward the edge, but she dug the heels of her trim riding boots against a ledge and held.

One last desperate effort, a mighty lunge, and he was lying on the cliff top, panting, shaking, cold blackness swirling about him. The girl pillowed his wet, dark head in her lap, rubbed his numb cheeks and gazed down at him with a look in her eyes that said all that a woman could say—with her eyes.

In the warm sunlight, Walt recovered quickly. He grinned at the girl, who smiled back at him through a mist of tears, and sat up.

"Pardner," he said, "we did it! Shake!"

Karma had brought a spare horse with her and Walt rode it to the Triangle B. John Banning sent for Jaggers Dunn and Walt told the two of them what he had learned. He was no engineer, but he had the trained cattleman's expert judgment of distances and topographical features. The G.M. waxed wildly enthusiastic.

"We got 'em beat!" he cried. "Son, you're a wonder, and that girl is a wonder, too."

"She sure is," agreed old John. "It's a pure pity she's gonna marry that hunchback cousin of hers."

SAD Sam Sooner was a shrewd business man, and far-sighted. He was the first of the Coronado saloonkeepers to close up shop and move to Busted. He proceeded to build a place twice as big, twice as ornate and twice as interesting as his Coronado bar. Sad Sam's place did a roaring business from the start.

It was pay day at the mines, pay day at the construction camp. Cowboys from the ranches were also drifting into town, and Busted was preparing for a night of nights. Mid-afternoon found

Sad Sam's place with more than a sprinkling in it.

Leaning against the bar, just drunk enough to be mean, Tol Douglass of the Circle Bar ranch was airing his opinions.

"I tell you it's not going through!" he bawled. "Not so long as Clinch Buster and his boys has anything to say about it. There ain't no damn railroad gonna stampede our cattle and burn our grass and make trouble in the hills. No sir!"

"I hear they're pretty near opposite the Circle Bar ranch house with their iron right now," observed a miner.

"Yeah, but you just wait. You'll see something!" declared Douglass, a knowing look in his hard eyes.

"They tell me if it hadn't been for that feller Harvey showing 'em a way through Shadow Canyon, they would never been able to do it," observed another miner. "That's a salty hombre, take it from me, gents."

Tol Douglass ripped out a curse. "That nosy range tramp!" he snarled. "First time I bump up against him I'm gonna slit his neck and shove his head through it. Walt Harvey! All he's got is luck and bluff, and I'd sure like a chance to call his bluff!"

A curious silence had fallen over the room. Douglass blinked, not understanding.

"What the devil—" he began, as an elbow nudged him.

He turned and stared into the eyes of the man about whom he'd just been speaking.

"You say you want to see me, Douglass?" Walt Harvey asked softly.

Tol Douglass fumbled with his hands, his eyes shifting from the tall cowboy's level gaze.

"N-no. I ain't looking for no trouble," he mumbled, and walked toward the door.

Walt turned his back on the room, but under the shadow of his hat he watched Douglass in the mirror of the back-bar.

He saw Tol reach the door and then whirl, gun coming out. Walt slewed sideways and drew with a brief flicker of his right hand. His Colt blazed before Tol could pull trigger.

Tol's gun roared, but the bullet slashed a hole through the ceiling. The smoking weapon fell from his hand and he gripped his bleeding wrist, doubling up with the pain of the wound. Still bent over, he cursed Walt viciously.

"That's more of your fool luck!" he bawled. "I'll get you yet, curse you! I'll—"

"Tol, come out of that!" A voice, clear and loud as a bugle call, rang through the room. "Fork your bronc and get for home while you're still able to ride!"

Rance Darnley stood just inside the doorway, the late sunlight making a golden crown of his tawny hair. His blue eyes were so dark as to seem purple. His somber gaze fixed on Walt Harvey and he nodded.

"Just a little more added to the score," he said. "Nope, the time ain't come yet. But it will come, don't worry, and you'll pay, feller, you'll pay."

He sidled through the door, supporting the groaning Douglass. Walt stared after him, face white, eyes dark with pain.

"It was him!" he murmured through stiff lips. "I said I'd know that voice if I ever heard it yelping orders again, and I did! The man she's gonna marry —the man she loves—a thieving, backshooting polecat!"

A voice at his elbow jogged him. "Feller, that was sure fast shooting," said an admiring miner. "You're just about tops at everything, looks like to me."

Walt turned grave eyes to him. "Nope," he said soberly, "in some things I'm just about the bottom of the heap. Hey, barkeep," he called, "shoot me a whisky."

UNDER the blaze of Arizona's stars, Busted roared and chanted. Men, their pockets bursting with money, showered gold on the reeking bars, the feverish gambling tables, into the hands of women who clutched it greedily.

Wilder grew the night, as more and more whisky was consumed, and the occasional flash of a knife and bark of a six-gun was a part of it. Men died, and the living didn't seem to care much, one way or the other.

Glumly sober, despite the amount of raw whisky he had drunk, Walt Harvey strolled from saloon to saloon. He drank at every bar, played a few hands of poker, bucked the tiger. Laughing dancehall girls invited him to dance, and he sometimes did. Midnight found him back at Sad Sam's place.

A bright-eyed little senorita snuggled up to him and he whirled her across the floor to the music of wailing violins and throbbing guitars. Her dark, curly head reminded him of another curly head, and her eyes were much the same, only they were liquidly black instead of darkly blue. He realized suddenly that she was maneuvering him to the edge of the dance floor, as far away from the other couples as possible.

"Senor," she whispered, "you are the Senor Harvey, are you not?"

"Uh-huh, that's me," admitted Walt. The girl glanced furtively about, then snuggled closer.

"Listen, senor," she breathed, "something you should know. It concerns the road of rails, and the big old man whose eyes are so cold and whose heart is so warm."

"You mean Jaggers Dunn, the general manager?" asked Walt. "What is it? Quick!"

"He rides over the new road tonight," whispered the girl. "Men of the hills plot to wreck his train and kill him. Then they blow up the road of rails with the big powder."

"How do you know this?" Walt asked.

"My Manuel," said the girl, "he is waiter at the Last Chance. Men of the hills drink there. With them the Senor Darnley and the Senor Douglass, whose wrist you hurt with the gun. My Manuel hear them talk. My Manuel tell me. I tell you, for I like the big old man. He sent the doctor to my father when he was hurt working to build the road of rails. He came then to see him and make my father laugh and make him get well."

Walt nodded, and his arm tightened about her trim waist.

"I understand," he said briefly. "I don't want the old man killed, either. You know where this is gonna happen?"

"They wait at the end of the road of rails," said the girl, "where the train must stop before it goes back to Coronado."

Walt nodded again. "Senorita, you're the goods," he said. He thrust a wad of bills into the girl's little hand, lifted her off her tiny feet and kissed her lips, hard. Then he set her down and left the saloon.

The little dancing girl started after him, the hand that held the money she pressed tight to her soft lips. She laughed, walked to the bar and spread the bills upon it.

"I buy drinks for you all," she said. "But," she added softly, "no man kisses my lips tonight."

VII

GETTING his horse, Walt rode to the Triangle B, his mind in a whirl. Things had been coming too fast tonight. First, the knowledge that Rance Darnley had been the leader of the train wreckers. Now, this fresh crime added to his list.

"Chances are Darnley and Douglass have been responsible for all the skulduggery that's been going on. Now they're on the prod again, and it seems like it's up to me to stop 'em for good and all."

Some of the Triangle B boys were in town, but most were at the ranch. Walt routed them out, also John Banning. There was feverish saddling and arming. Grim of purpose, the crew thundered toward Clinch Buster's Circle Bar ranch house.

"We'll stop there first," said Walt. "I want to see old Clinch."

Dawn was painting the mountain tops in rose and gold and scarlet glory when they crashed up to the Circle Bar. The bunkhouse was dark and deserted, but old Clinch answered their knock. He listened to Walt's terse explanation.

"I don't hold by no such carryings on," he declared grimly. "Wait till I get my rifle. I'm riding with you."

Neither he nor Walt saw the blue-eyed girl who, clad only in a simple night robe, listened at her window. As the riders drummed away, she dressed in frantic haste, saddled her horse and raced away along a short cut that she alone knew.

Over the crest of a rise swept the cattlemen, and down a long slope. Ahead, less than a mile distant, was the point where the railroad iron ceased. The grading had gone on ahead, but the rails were not yet up to it. As they rode, a low humming filled the air. It grew to a rumble, the crackling exhaust of a big locomotive.

"There she goes!" exclaimed old Clinch Buster.

"And there it is happening!" cried Walt Harvey, his face bleak and drawn.

A crash of gunfire ripped through the boom of the exhaust, which quickly stilled. The engine with its single car coasted to a halt. About it rode yelling, shooting figures.

"Come on, boys!" roared Walt Harvey. "Give it to 'em!"

Down the slope thundered Clinch Buster and the Triangle B, guns out. The outlaws saw them coming and hurled bullets in their direction. A saddle was emptied. Another man clutched at a crippled arm. Walt Harvey's hat was whisked from his head. Then the cattlemen's rifles and six-shooters boomed answer. Two of the outlaws went sprawling. A third slumped drunkenly in his saddle. A horse was shot dead.

Walt Harvey outdistanced his men. He raced forward at a long slant, guns blazing. Rance Darnley and several others rode to meet him.

"Here's where you get it, you blasted range tramp!" yelled Darnley, throwing down with deadly aim.

Out of a dark gulch drummed a golden sorrel horse. In the saddle was the trim little figure of Karma Hunter.

"No, Rance!" she cried out in her clear voice. "No! You mustn't!"

Straight in front of the blazing guns she rode. And Walt saw her sway, droop as does a tired flower, and pitch from her saddle to lie, a pathetic, crumpled little heap, on the grass.

Darnley and the others forgotten, Walt raced his horse to her side, knelt beside her and raised her in his arms. The guns were suddenly silent. Men stared with whitening faces, their conflicting reasons for killing suddenly drained from them by this stark tragedy.

Rance Darnley, his face a gray agony, sidled forward to kneel beside Walt Harvey. Wordless, the two men stared into the still face of the girl.

The outlaws were furtively backing their horses. One by one they rode away. The cattlemen did not stop them. Old Clinch Buster stumbled forward.

Jaggers Dunn, his face bloody, came running from the bullet-shattered private car. He took the girl's motionless form from Walt, ripped open her gray flannel shirt and laid bare the wound. Just below one breast was a small blue hole, from which sluggishly seeped a few drops of blood.

"The slug went clean through, anyhow, thank God!" rumbled the G.M., "but if I know anything about wounds, there's internal bleeding going on. She's got to have a doctor's attention, and right away!"

HE ripped off his own soft, white shirt, tore it to strips and bandaged the wound. Then he stood up, the girl in his arms.

"The damn sidewinders shot every last one of my train and engine crew," he said. "Harvey, I don't suppose you know one end of a coal shovel from the other, but it's up to you to keep that engine hot from here to Coronado. Buster, you ride with her in the car."

He turned toward the short train, Walt following him, as Rance Darnley spoke up, his voice thick with pain.

"What are you going to do." he asked.

"I'm taking this girl to the Coronado hospital as fast as the wheels on that engine will turn over," Jaggers Dunn replied coldly.

Sidling, grotesque, Darnley scurried to his horse, flung himself into the saddle.

"Right about now Tol Douglass is getting set to blow the cliff with dynamite," he shouted in his high, clear voice. "Maybe you can get past in time. You got a chance in a hundred. Or maybe I can stop him before he does it. There's a short cut from here."

In a clatter of hoofs he was gone. After him streamed the Triangle B crew.

"Come on!" growled Jaggers Dunn.

Walt Harvey knew nothing of firing a locomotive, but he learned. With General Manager James G. Dunn at the throttle, the giant locomotive roared through the echoing gorge, her stack thundering, her drivers a flashing blur, her side-rods clanking a wild song. Faster and faster, with Jaggers barking instructions to Walt.

Reeling, slipping, sliding on the bucking deck, Walt tried to obey instructions. With grim satisfaction he saw the steam gauge pressure-hand rise. Jaggers nodded approval as the safety valve lifted with a bellow, and reached for his water injector handle.

Then Walt saw Douglass kneeling over his unlighted fuse. He saw Rance Darnley racing toward him, waving his arms and shouting. He could almost see the snarl on Tol's angry face. He did

see Douglass shake his head and swiftly fire the fuse, and then he saw the flash of Darnley's gun.

As the flying engine boomed up the track, Tol Douglass flung erect, whipped out his gun and fired. Then he crumpled up in a heap.

Walt saw Darnley pitch from the saddle, rise, sprawl on his face, and rise again. He sidled and crawled to the burning fuse, seized it, ripped it in two with his teeth as the fire neared the cap. Under him roared the train he had saved.

Glancing back, Walt saw the last glint of sunlight on Darnley's golden hair. Then the grotesque figure sagged and pitched over the cliff.

The cowboy-fireman turned back to his task with a sigh.

"Rotten bad," he breathed. "But there was a man inside that crooked hellion, after all."

There were long hours of waiting in the Coronado hospital. Hours that tried Walt Harvey's soul. Then a white-clad doctor came to the three men who sat so tensely in their chairs. The doctor was smiling.

"Yes, she'll make it," he said. "She's not in the slightest danger now and should be up and about in a couple of weeks. But," he added impressively, "she owes her life to the speed with which she was brought to the hospital. There was a slow hemorrhage which, had it not been checked without delay, would have killed her. You gentlemen are to be congratulated. Yes, you can see her."

QUIETLY they tiptoed into the sickroom. Karma smiled wanly at them, but her eyes lingered on Walt's face.

"Safe!" she whispered. "All of you safe." Then she asked a question. "Rance?"

"He went out like a man," Walt told her. "It was him, really, that saved you. He held Douglass up long enough for us to get past."

"Poor Rance," she sighed. "I was always fond of him. But perhaps it is better so."

"Ma'am—Karma," Walt stuttered. "He wasn't—you wasn't gonna—"

Karma smiled again, less wanly. "No, I was not," she whispered with emphasis.

Jaggers Dunn chuckled deeply. "Guess railroads aren't so bad, eh, Buster?" he bantered.

Old Clinch rumbled in his throat. "They had to come," he said. "Country's getting so busy they're needed. Yeah, railroads is all right.

"But," he added, turning to Walt and Karma, "there's something for you two to get straight. All the Busters and their connections has always been cattlemen. Get it straight, I say! I don't want to be great-grandpappy to no railroaders!"

LOOK FORWARD TO—

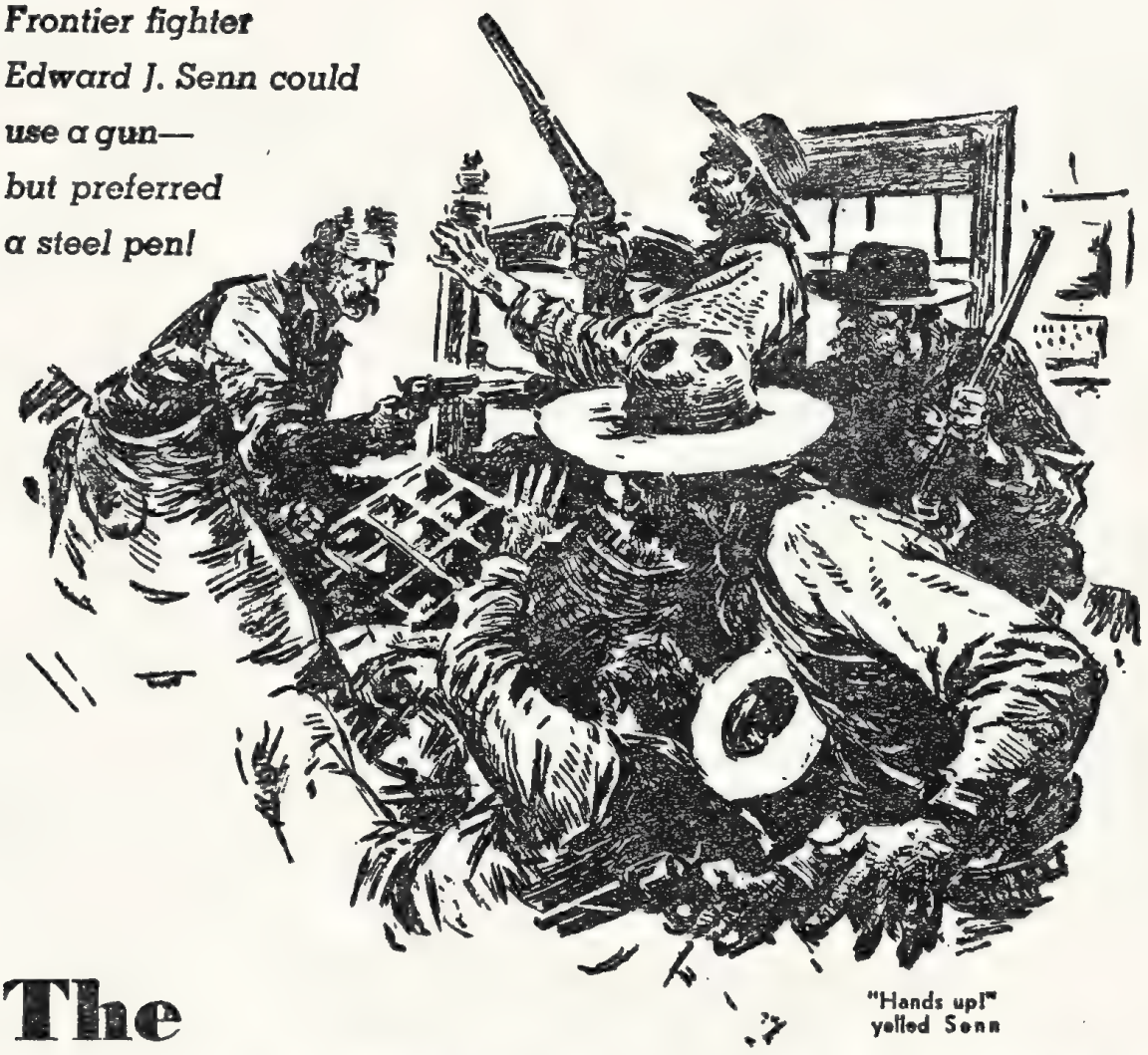
OUTLAWS ALL

A Smashing Novel of the Utah Country

By W. D. HOFFMAN

COMING NEXT ISSUE!

Frontier fighter Edward J. Senn could use a gun— but preferred a steel pen!



"Hands up!" yelled Senn

The CRUSADING EDITOR

WHEN the average reader looks for a hero out of the Old West, he generally picks a swashbuckling sheriff or a colorful bandit—but always a picturesque character. Some even choose a female favorite, such as Calamity Jane or Belle Starr, from whose hair glistens the aura of romance. Generally the figure so selected is marked because he—or she—was glamorous.

But one frontier hero, back in the 'Nineties, stood a long way from glamour. He was rugged enough, as befitted his times. He was ideally placed, in the locale he made famous, South Dakota. But he rode no fiery steed. Neither was he a bechapped and sombreroed Knight of the Open Range, with a brace of black walnut-handled Colts. His weapon was a rusty steel pen. His name was Edward J. Senn, and he was the grubby, ink-stained owner and publisher of the Lyman County *Weekly Pioneer*, a frontier newspaper.

From a very early age he had always wanted to write—to bring to the people

A True Western Story by C. M. SAVAGE

of the humble farming community in which he lived, the shining truth as he saw it. When he reached manhood he accepted a position as schoolteacher in a little red schoolhouse near Fort Randall. But the cramped and stodgy business of enlightening the young irked him and he longed for wider, freer fields. He would often take long walks along the primitive roads, wondering if there wasn't a better way of making a living than teaching the children of the farmers and the sons and daughters of the troops stationed in that bleak outpost.

He Meets Christa

It was on one of these walks that he met a young barefoot girl, driving a few gaunt cows to pasture. She was blond, petite and pretty with golden pigtails hanging down her back. She blushed and stammered. So did he. In the four years that followed, they often met in this way. Then he was properly introduced to her at a community dance.

That night he walked her home. They were still bashful and shy. At her door they said their formal good-by and each turned to go. Suddenly a wave of great courage swept through the young schoolteacher. He explained to the girl that he was penniless—even deeply in debt. He had nothing to offer her, yet would she—could she—marry him? To his utter delight and amazement, Christa—for that was her name—informed him that she not only could, but would. Also she did!

According to the open-handed generosity of those times, everyone about the countryside had faith in the young couple. To them was extended all the necessary credit, so they could make a home for themselves. Senn relinquished his job as schoolteacher. Next, backed by his wife, he purchased a small herd of cattle with the idea of beginning a new life in the great and open section of the country.

But then there descended upon them the blight that was for years to mar their young lives. It was the same blight that had given the entire West a bad name—a reign of terror and lawlessness that was to retard civilization for decades. It was an evil only too common out there—rustling!

One dark night a party of owlhoots raided their ranch and drove off their tiny herd. In vain did the young bridegroom rush out to resist. Young Senn received a bullet in his forearm for his pains. Neighbors were treated in like manner. Work, privation, self-denial and honest effort, were swept away in a stroke by a band of ruthless and dishonest men.

Right then and there Edward L. Senn swore a great oath. He would fight these human vultures with every force at his command. At the same time he realized he was but one lone human being against many. So instead of bullets he chose the weapons he was best suited to handle—the Truth in the shape of the printed word. Senn knew now he had a purpose in life. It was then that the *Weekly Pioneer* was born.

Scraping together what little cash he had, Senn again called upon his loyal friends for more credit. With this the belligerent editor bought type, paper and a rickety one-man press. He took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and went to work. Soon those valiant editorials, wherein Senn pulled no punches, came rolling from his crude printing establishment.

Under the continual hammering of this crusading country editor, the ranchers in that section of the country began to recover their courage. They were willing to follow where he led. Cattle owners no longer cringed and hurried out of sight when thieves and bandits appeared among them. They stood their ground and shot it out with the owlhoots. The organized marauders began to be more careful. While they continued to patronize saloons and dancehalls, they no longer dared to shoulder men and women off the board walks. The pioneer children learned it was no longer necessary to flee in terror from these ruffians.

Owlhoots Decide to Hit Back

Soon the organized outlaws decided, in self-preservation, it would be necessary for them to strike back. The leaders held a meeting. Some of the owlhoots were in favor of stringing up, not only the editor, but his wife as well. But a certain caution had begun to make itself felt, even among these lawless men. The council finally decided to make an "example" of Senn. He'd become too doggone obstreperous!

Accordingly, two nights later, six

grim-faced armed men gathered outside of Senn's combination newspaper office and home, smashed down the door, and rushed inside. They were confronted by the bride, Mrs. Christa Senn. She was immediately knocked down and brutally beaten. When Senn came dashing out of another room to her aid, he was promptly smacked over the head with a rifle barrel and knocked unconscious. Then the invaders systematically wrecked the print shop. They emptied every can of ink and scattered the type all over the floor. Some of the fonts were tossed out of the window. With axes and iron bars the raiders wrecked the printing press.

So intent were these men upon their mission of destruction that they failed to notice that the editor had regained consciousness. Dizzily Senn tottered to his feet. He grappled with one of the ruffians who had felled him and wrenched away his gun. While they struggled, the other outlaws were afraid to fire, for fear of hitting the wrong man.

Then, by a terrific effort, Senn tore himself free. He drove his fist into the outlaw's face, sending him sprawling to the floor. Then he swung the muzzle of his gun around just as a second outlaw was raising his rifle to fire pointblank at the editor. Senn fired first—and the owlhoot dropped to the floor, screeching with agony as crimson spouted from his punctured shoulder.

"Hands up!" yelled the editor, in blood curdling tones. "Quick! Or I'll wipe you all out."

The other outlaws took one look at his blazing eyes and infuriated face, paper-white and mottled with red from the wound in his head, and reached toward the ceiling as high as they could stretch. This was at close quarters—too close to miss—and the face of Senn at that moment was the face of a maniac. They were taking no chances.

Senn now saw that he held the upper hand. Two of the owlhoots were on the floor, and the others were cowed. But he knew he could not hold his advantage for long. He was sick and injured, and the condition of his bride filled him with alarm. So wisely, he decided to get rid of them. He ordered them to pick up their wounded and get out of the print shop. The frightened raiders lost no time in obeying. Carrying their injured friends, they fairly bolted through the open door. Then Senn sprang to the side of his bride, lying on the floor. To his relief he found she was suffering only from a slight scalp wound and was regaining consciousness.

Raid Arouses State

The reports of this outrage spread far and fast. Senn, with the aid of spare parts, soon repaired the smashed press, and at once published a special edition which sold like hot cakes. With pitiless detail he printed every incident of that brutal raid. An accompanying editorial fairly smoked with scorn and defiance. The whole State of South Dakota was aroused to indignation. So high did feeling run that saloonkeepers no longer dared accept known bandits as patrons. Owlhoots became suddenly unpopular.

In less than a year the community of Lyman was cleared of outlaws. Crooked politicians who supported the owlhoot leaders were ousted from office.

Editor Senn's valiant crusade spread like wildfire. In time over thirty newspapers throughout the state bore his name and carried out his policies.

No, Edward J. Senn rode no fiery steed. His weapon was a rusty steel pen. But in those few seconds, during that raid on the print shop, he showed he could wield a gun, and fire it with reasonable accuracy.

His name should be inscribed among those of the heroes of the West, along with the saying:

"The pen is mightier than the sword—" or a six-gun also, for that matter!

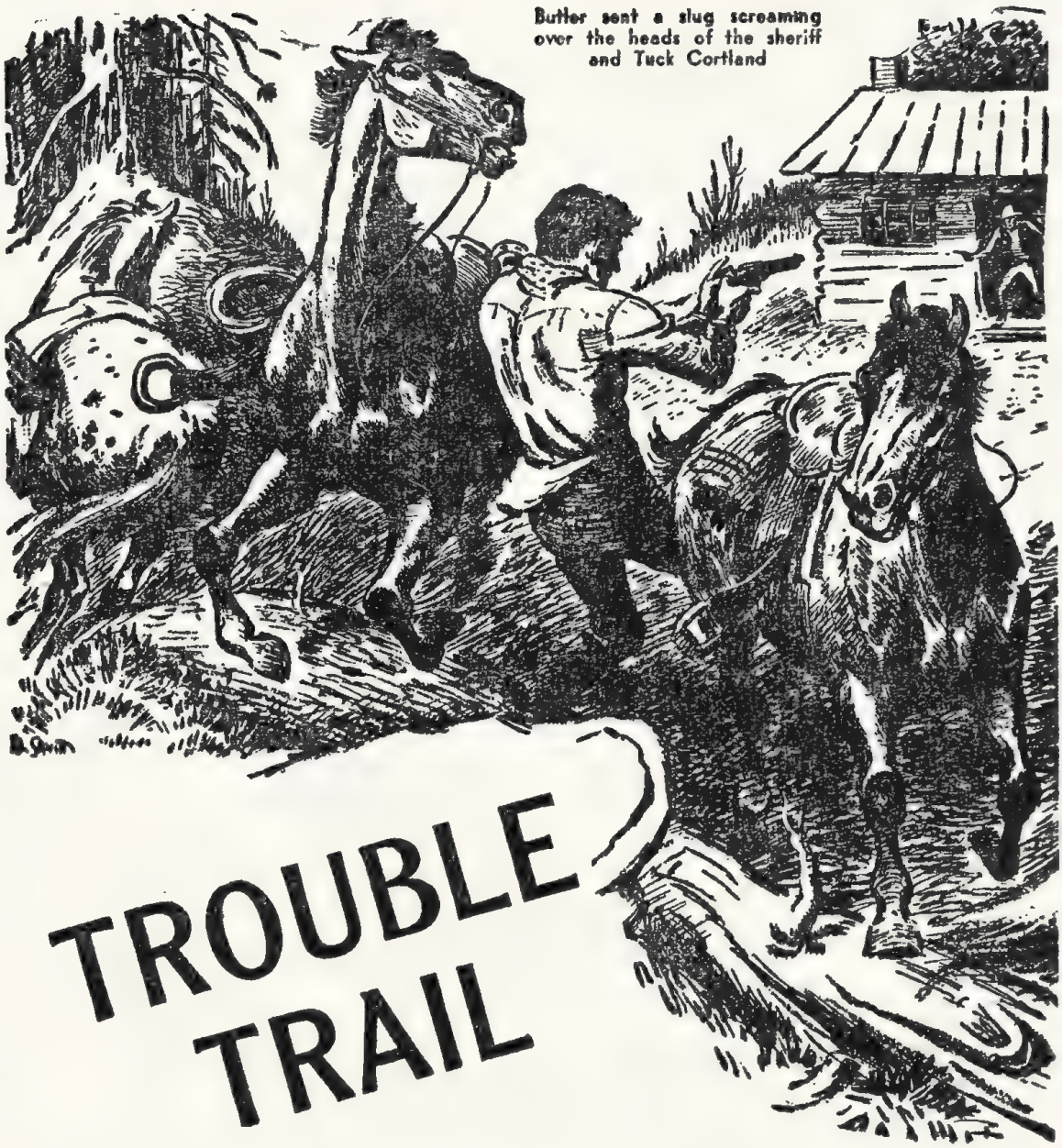
●

NEXT ISSUE

SEED OF THE SIX-GUN

A Novel of Superstition Valley

By SYL MacDOWELL



Butler sent a slug screaming over the heads of the sheriff and Tuck Cortland

TROUBLE TRAIL

I

WHEN the rifle barked toward the V-shaped notch in the hills that was Wolf Pass, Steve Butler yipped shrilly and drove his shaggy dun pony at the bleating, uneasy sheep. He grinned into the cold Montana rain, and his voice raised sharply as he tried without success to hurry the sheep.

"Hi-yah!" Steve yelled into the wind and rain. "Rattle them grass spoilin' hoofs, you smelly cusses. That rifle poppin' means Uncle Tom kilt a blacktail deer. Get a-movin', woolies. Prince, Queen! Jerry! Nip these balky sheep!"

Three collies pressed in toward the stubborn flock, barking and nipping, sending the balky leaders of the three hundred head of sheep on up the slope toward the pass. But suddenly Steve Butler was paying no more attention to

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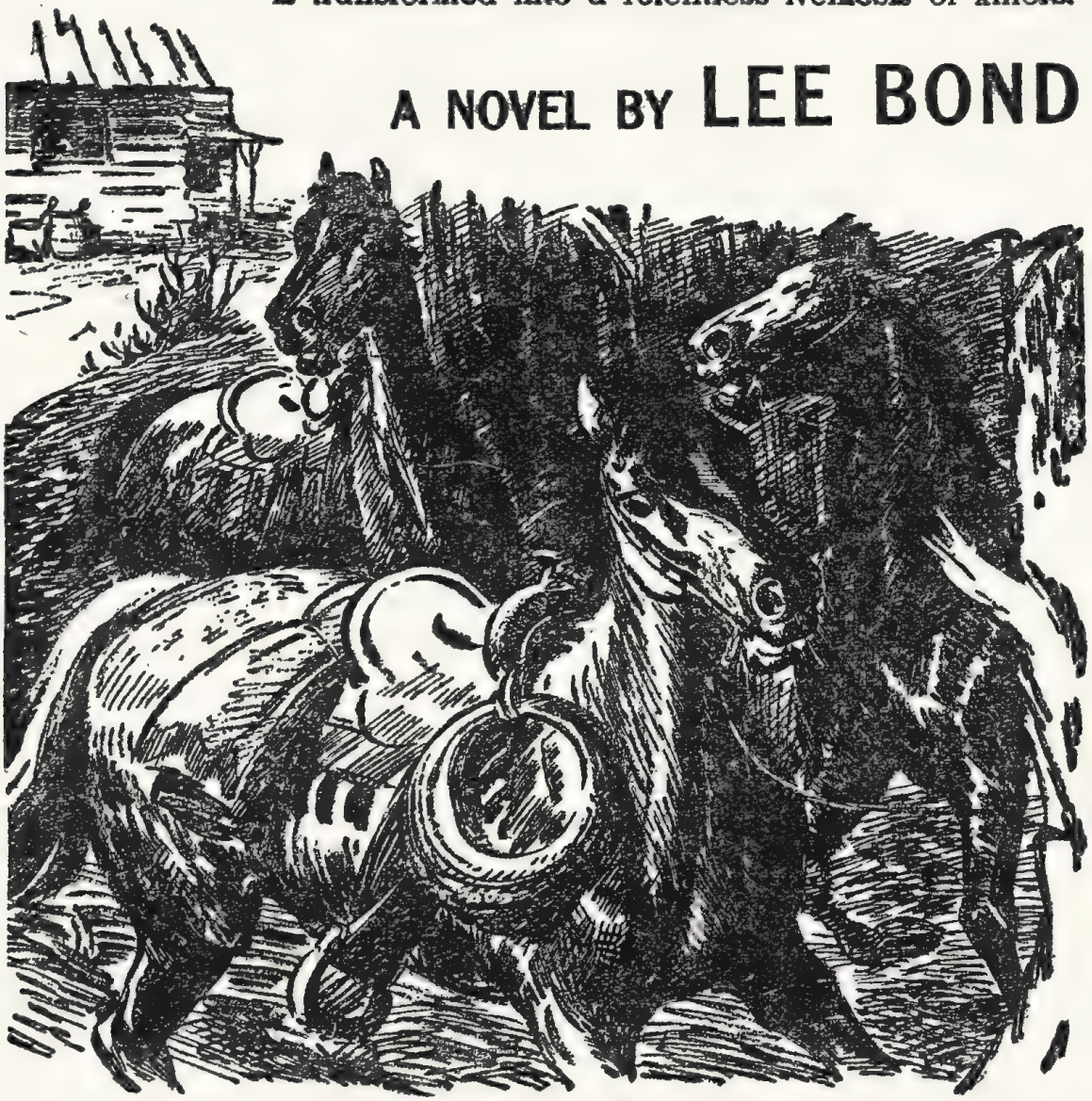
Shots in the night, a wagon rumbling over a cliff—and Steve Butler is transformed into a relentless Nemesis of killers!

A NOVEL BY LEE BOND



the sheep and the three well-trained dogs. There were other guns banging up yonder in the pass now.

Steve swung his horse out from behind the sheep. His face became pale as he jabbed spurs against the dun's ribs.

"Move, horse!" he croaked. "There's somethin' wrong up yonder. Ma and Uncle Tom couldn't be doin' all that shootin'. Hustle, you lazy critter!"

The pony hustled, and Steve bent hunched forward as he roared up the old, nearly forgotten roadway. There were fresh tracks made by the big canvas-topped wagon his mother and Tom Welton, her brother, had driven on up the slope.

They had meant to make camp yonder at the pass, where shaggy bluffs would give them protection against the

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spring squall that was lashing the badlands furiously. But something had gone wrong there in the pass, although Steve could not imagine anyone shooting at his frail, sad-eyed mother or at big, slow-moving, good-natured Tom Welton, his uncle. Then his face became a sickly gray color as he caught a single, long-reaching scream.

"Ma!" he yelled, and drummed all the harder with dull rowels against his mount's sides.

Then another sound reached him—the thunderous rumble that only a big wagon can make when it goes over very rough ground at a high rate of speed. The sound of the wagon was swinging off left, away from the pass and toward the mysterious and mist-shrouded void, that marked the big canyon.

NEW terror gripped Steve Butler's soul as he thought of his mother in the wagon racing toward that canyon ahead. He flung over hard against wet reins, sent his pony scooting from the old road and out into a stand of stunted pines. Steve Butler stood up in the saddle, a hoarse cry of anguish springing from his throat as a great thundering, splintering sound was punctured by the screams of crippled horses.

The wagon had gone over the rim up yonder somewhere, no question of that. But had his mother and uncle gone with it?

"Run, horse!" Steve choked. "Run!"

He did not see the gnarled, low-swinging pine bough that reached out over the deer run his horse had been following. Thick as a man's forearm, the branch was green and strong. Steve's forehead smashed solidly into the branch, and he knew a moment of great surprise as the black shadow seemed shot with vermilion flashes.

Steve did not know that he crashed backward from the saddle. He did not feel the impact of his body as it smashed down to the stony earth, nor did he know that the dun pony skidded on braced legs then halted obediently. The first thing Steve heard as consciousness began returning was the banging of swiftly fired guns. He had no idea that he had been out cold for over thirty minutes.

He groaned, rolled over on one side, and lay there, sick from the taste of blood and from the hammering pains which tore through his head. The pain reached down into his neck, and at each movement it seemed to him that someone drove a red-hot knife into the muscles along his neck.

The guns quit their hellish clamor at last, and Steve propped himself up on one elbow. He stared dazedly at the trees about him. Then his glance was drawn to the movement of four riders jogging up the old road toward Wolf Pass.

The riders were passing a bottle among them, and Steve could see their wet faces shine in the greenish glare of a lightning bolt that split the leaden sky. He cried out weakly to the men, but a clap of thunder drowned out his yell.

When the rumbling was over, the riders were getting well up toward the pass, and Steve's eyes clung to them as nausea gripped him again. One man, he saw, was taller than the others. But outside of that, he could see nothing that might help him remember those four.

He lay there face down on the thin blanket of wet pine needles, numbed and sick. He knew that he ought to get his horse and see about his mother and uncle, but he was unable to move. Steve could hear the water dripping down out of the trees and splatter against his slicker. To fight off the encroaching drowsiness which assailed him, he tried to count the sounds of the drops of water striking his slicker. By concentrating on those dull little sounds he managed to cheat the unconsciousness which threatened him.

It was nearly half an hour before the pain in his forehead and neck became acute again. He realized that, with the return of the pain, he no longer felt drowsy, and managed to get to his feet. A more careful examination told him that his forehead had been deeply cut, and now blood was beginning to run down into his eyes, blinding him.

Steve knotted a red bandanna about his head, stopping the flow. He found his hat lying there in the gloom, and saw the stout branch above him, and knew what had happened. But he was

thinking of that terrified scream he had heard, and of the bit wagon sounding as if the four horses which pulled it had run away up close to the pass.

STEVE climbed back into the saddle, shaking and white from pain and shock. His neck felt as if it might be

STEVE BUTLER

out of joint, but his own hurts could wait.

He wedged his hat down over the clumsy bandage as tight as he could, and rode on along the ridge until the timber played out.

He saw torn, muddy earth where wheels and hoofs had ploughed and skidded.

He reared his dun to a halt, trembling as if a chill gripped him as his sharp brown eyes followed the scarred marks of hoof and wheel.

Steve sprang out of the saddle and ran along the torn earth. The marks ended where the soil gave way to the narrow shelf of rimrock, and Steve knew before he stood teetering on the brink to stare down at the twisted wreckage that the wagon had gone over.

He could see the big wagon down there a hundred feet below, a shapeless mass of torn canvas and wood. One wheel lay farther down the rocky slope, and the four horses were sprawled about the wrecked wagon they had drawn, lifeless shapes in the pelting rain.

Steve Butler never remembered running back to his pony, springing into the saddle, and racing nearly half a mile to the head of the canyon, where his mount could find footing for the descent. And when he finally reached the wrecked wagon there was nothing he could do. His mother and uncle were there in the twisted remnants of the big vehicle, white and still, looking up at him out of eyes that were sightless in death. . . .

The chill, wet day was less than three hours old when Steve Butler finished his grim task. Throughout most of the storm-swept night he had worked there at the base of the scowling cliff. A fire, built back under a crag where the pelting rain could not destroy it, had furnished a flickering red light, by which Steve had toiled, digging two graves in the stony earth.

After his gruesome task was finished he laid aside the shovel he had salvaged from the wagon wreckage, and dragged a sleeve slowly across his pale cheeks. He looked up at the bluff and cursed it huskily. He cursed the mist that swirled in gray banners about him, and cursed the wind and rain that beat gently against his face.

Steve turned to his dun pony, where it had grazed on the grass which was showing green against the rocks of the slope.

He stepped up into the saddle and rode away from the two new graves, a sob wrenching his weary body.

He found the sheep strewn along the base of the cliff, lying in dirty gray blotches against the stones. They had been split into small bands and crowded over the rimrock. He found a pitiful huddle of living animals, less than twenty in all. Steve killed them with the two big .45s he had taken from the wrecked wagon—guns that had been his uncle's.

Not an animal among those few living ones had been sound, and Steve Butler's hands shook as he sent mercy bullets crashing into their skulls. Then he turned from the canyon of death, the leaden weight within him colder, heavier than ever.

II

HE found the three collies out on top of the ridge, their happy yipping forever stilled by bullets that had torn their bodies the day before. Steve turned into the pass then, his eyes pools of suffering. And there was something else in those eyes now—something older than Steve's years, something bitter.

Before his mind's eye swam the hazy vision of those four riders he had seen yesterday. And in the back of Steve's brain lay the picture of his mother and his uncle, as he had found them in the ruins of the bit wagon. His uncle had been shot four times.

Steve knew now that the wagon had been turned from the trail in the pass, sent crashing over the rimrock purposely by the four riders he had seen yesterday. He realized that he would have been killed if they had seen him. They had murdered his uncle, sent the wagon over the rim and caused the death of his mother. They had killed his collies, separated the sheep into small bunches, and driven the helpless little animals over the canyon rim.

Looking down, Steve could see the dim, rain-filled marks left by the hoofs of the horses those four had ridden. Raw hell blazed in his blood-shot brown eyes as he laid the spurs to his mount and roared into Wolf Pass. The sign was dim from the rain, yet plain enough for him to follow at a hard clip.

He thundered down a long, ragged slope, and saw tall cottonwoods ahead of him. He heard a deep, sullen roar of water, and reined in at last, cursing as he glared at the swollen, yellow expanse of the Missouri River surging and lunging there ahead of him, swollen by the rains until it was at the flood stage.

Steve sniffed burning wood, turned in his saddle and saw the squat log building there among the cottonwoods. He heard himself being hailed above the water's roar, and turned his horse toward the building.

A little, rat-faced hombre in dirty clothes was standing in the doorway of the log building, waving at him. Steve reined in, swung down out of the saddle, and staggered from sheer fatigue as his boots hit the muddy earth. The rat-faced fellow's beady eyes squinted, and a grin stretched his bearded, unwashed face into a patronizing leer.

"Purty well loaded already, huh?" the scrawny fellow cackled. "Well, just wait till you taste my corn liquor. I'm Luke Cotter, cowboy, in case you ain't already been told you'd find Luke Cotter a-runnin' this saloon here at Cow Thief Crossin'. Ride far?"

"Plenty far," Steve croaked. "Any chance of a man crossin' this crick now?"

"Creek, hell!" Luke Cotter snorted. "That stream is the Missouri River, cowboy. And when she's up like this, a beaver would get drowned if he tried to swim it. Waltz inside and try some of the liquor I made. First drink is always on the house."

"Got a place where you can stable and feed this pony?" Steve asked wearily.

"Sure," Cotter answered. "I'll look after your nag. But come on in and warm your belly. Best corn liquor this side of nowhere. I even drink it myownself."

STEVE stumbled up the split log steps and into the room. He saw a sway-backed pine bar along one wall, and staggered toward it, paying no attention to Luke Cotter's eternal chatter.

Steve was only twenty-two, and wasn't used to hard liquor. But he leaned slowly against the pine bar now, lifted a glass of corn whisky, and downed it in a single, breathless gulp. It burned his throat like liquid fire, yet his set face did not change expression, and his staring, blood-shot eyes gave no hint that it stung him.

"Shucks, you're made out of leather, I reckon," Luke Cotter snorted. "First man ever I see could swaller my white lightnin' and not yell for water. The next one is costin' you two bits."

Steve felt the whisky warming his stomach. He fished in his pocket, took out a gold coin, and tossed the money on the bar without a word. The warm glow was beginning to spread through him, and for the first time in many long hours the mind of Steve Butler began clearing. He swallowed the second jolt of the white stuff, shuddered a little, and fumbling lifted his change from the bar top. Steve took off his hat then, and heard Cotter's sharp intake of breath.

"Say, I figgered you was drunk when you first came in here," Cotter yapped. "But maybe I was wrong. There's blood

on that rag you've got around your head. You been in a ruckus?"

Steve looked dazedly at the rat-faced man, seeing him clearly for the first time. That second drink was taking hold now, driving the last of the cold, dead feeling from Steve, sending the fires of bitterness, grief, and hate through his veins.

"I've been in no ruckus," Steve said slowly. "But yesterday four dirty, back-shootin' sons jumped my uncle and mother and run their wagon over a bluff."

Without stopping to consider the fact that he had never seen Cotter before, Steve Butler began talking, his grief blinding him to his listener's sudden interest. Cotter was hovering beside him, beady eyes bulging and frightened as he listened.

"And that's all I know," the wounded puncher finished hoarsely. "I was figuring' on tacklin' the flood when I heard you holler. You see four riders cross the river yesterday, late?"

QUICKLY Steve looked up as he finished, and Luke Cotter's face was mottled, twitching.

"M-me?" he stammered. "No, I never seen four men around here yesterday. But you mosey off yonder into my bedroom and lay down a spell. When you've rested a mite, we can figger a thing or two out. What'd you say your name was?"

"Butler—Steve Butler. Reckon I'll try to sleep a while. Maybe by the time I wake up the river will be run down. Then I can strike the sign of them four drygulchers on the far bank."

His voice trailed off as he followed Luke Cotter. In a dirty lean-to at the back there was a sour-smelling bunk, into which Steve rolled after removing his boots, hat and gun belts. Steve's body was hardly settled on the stinking blankets when sleep pressed down, blotting out the pain of his recent sorrow.

Luke Cotter backed from the room, and his broad, crooked teeth were chattering audibly as he rushed into the barroom once more. He quickly downed a long, gurgling drink, then ran for the front door.

"Tuck Cortland sure put his neck into a noose this time," he chattered. "So did Humpy Morgan, Butch Gore and Dick Hardy. Warnin' Cortland ought to put me in solid with him and his bunch. Maybe they'll even pay me money to tell 'em what I know."

Luke Cotter ran around the corner of the saloon and toward the little barn and corral, where he kept a stout, grain-fed horse.

III

COLD water sluicing into his face brought Steve Butler spluttering awake. He sat up with a violent jerk, sleeving water from his eyes, blinking into the yellow lamplight which flooded the lean-to. Steve saw men there, but was too sleep-drugged and blinded by water to see them clearly. He heard a muttering growl and knew that some fellow grabbed his wrists, wrenched them sharply. Then Steve felt something cold about those wrists, and snapped wide awake when his dazed eyes caught on winking bright metal. Handcuffs!

"What's happened!" he yelped, and sprang upright, staring pop-eyed at the handcuffs which held his wrists linked together.

"You're under arrest, feller," a harsh voice beat into his ears. "The charge is murder."

Steve's head snapped up, and there was no sleep in his eyes now. There were four men in the room, watching him narrowly, their hands resting on gun butts.

"Arrest?" Steve repeated dazedly. "What for?"

His eyes were on a spindly fellow who had a sheriff's badge pinned to an open vest front, and his narrow deeply seamed face was twisted into an ugly grin. Steve saw dark eyes regarding him and watched the sheriff's thin lips peel back from yellowed snags of teeth in an expression that was anything but pleasant.

"I told you the charge is murder, didn't I?" the badge-toter sneered. "But them handcuffs won't keep you from pulling on your boots, so get busy. You're going to the Lookout town jail for murderin' Luke Cotter. Shot the poor cuss through the back. We found the money box Luke always kept behind his bar hid here under the bed. Reckon you got so drunk after you murdered Luke that you went to sleep."

Steve stared dazedly at the sheriff and at the other three. He noticed that

those other three were grinning, nudging each other."

"Cotter?" Steve croaked. "Yeah, I remember now. The gent who runs this place. I came in here and had a couple of drinks, then turned in. I ain't heard any shots and I didn't plug him. I reckon it was this mornin' some time that I got here."

"Yesterday mornin', from the sign outside," the sheriff snorted. "It's nearly daylight now. From what we figgered out, you lit here some time yesterday."

"Yesterday, then," Steve bit out harshly. "But I didn't kill Cotter. Last I seen of him he was here in the room, tellin' me to get some sleep."

Memory was returning with painful clarity now, and Steve stood there white and tense, thinking of those two graves he had dug and filled out yonder in the badlands, and of the rain-dimmed horse tracks he had followed to the edge of the river.

"I'm Sim Longley, young feller, sheriff of this county," the mean looking badge-toter was saying thinly. "This gent here is Tuck Cortland, boss of the Flyin' Y. Butch Gore here is range boss of the Flyin' Y outfit. The long gent, there, is Dick Hardy, a Flyin' Y rider. Did Cotter mention Tuck Cortland or any other Flyin' Y man to you?"

A stab of warning burned through Steve, sharpening his wits as he looked more intently at the men before him.

"Tuck" Cortland was a tall fellow, with dark, hawkish features, a thin red gash of a mouth and the coldest eyes Steve had ever looked into. Dick Hardy, gaunt and ribby looking, had a solemn face and deep-set eyes. "Butch" Gore was a short and deep-chested fellow, and his broad, strong-jawed face was covered with a stubble of wiry red whiskers.

THE shock of tragedy was still too fresh for Steve's mind to work rapidly. The sheriff's bony fist flashed out and caught him on the mouth. Steve tasted blood from cut lips as he righted himself after staggering violently back against the bunk.

"I asked you if Luke Cotter mentioned Tuck Cortland or any of the other Flyin' Y men," the scrawny sheriff snarled.

"Cotter mentioned nobody," Steve rasped. "And listen, if you take another swing at me, I'll rack your skull open, even if I am wearin' handcuffs."

"Tough one, eh?" Tuck Cortland snapped. "Well, fella, that'll be taken out of you soon. Murder is a serious charge, in case you don't know it."

"I've murdered nobody," Steve spat blood toward the window at his elbow.

"Don't lie, you murderer!" Dick Hardy shouted. "We found Cotter layin' out there in the front room, shot in the back. Your jumper pocket, yonder, has got a wad of money in it, which us four men figger came from Cotter's tin money tray."

"And the money tray is under this bunk where you stuck it," Butch Gore rumbled. "Your goose is cooked."

"I wouldn't kill a man for a few dollars," Steve retorted. "You gents are either barkin' up the wrong tree, or else you're lyin' deliberate. Suppose I take a look at this dead Cotter hombre you claim you found."

Steve sat down on the edge of the bunk as he talked, and pulled on his boots. He lifted manacled hands to his forehead and found that the bandage was no longer there. He felt the swollen lump where his forehead had come in violent contact with the low-hanging branch up at Wolf Pass.

The gash was raw edged and was still bleeding a little, but the pain of it was gone. Steve's neck still felt sore and stiff. He picked up his hat from the floor, saw the bandanna he had used as a bandage lying on the rough boards.

"Looks like Cotter got in a lick or two before you beefed him," Tuck Cortland observed. "Your forehead didn't get chewed up that way by mosquitoes."

Steve drew his hat on carefully, tucked the soiled bandanna into a hip pocket, and stood up. He was on the verge of telling how he had gotten that gash between his eyes, but a caution, born of his uneasiness, warned him to silence. He stepped past the hard-faced sheriff and the three Flying Y men, to stride from the lean-to out into the barroom.

Steve stopped on wide spaced feet, his already pallid face turning even whiter. Sprawled on the floor before the pine bar was Cotter, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling.

Steve heard the sheriff and the others stamp into the room behind him, but did not move until fingers bit savagely

into his arm. He felt himself jerked violently forward, and glanced down sidewise into the red stubbled face of Butch Gore.

"Move a little closer, and take a better look at what you've done," Gore growled.

Steve was thrown off balance, hurled roughly forward by the husky cowpuncher who was gripping his right arm. And suddenly a blind rage tore through Steve's brain, at being manhandled by this tough hombre.

Steve caught his balance, swung his right elbow up and back in a savage drive that sent Butch Gore sailing backward as if a bronc had kicked him in the face. Gore landed on his back, yammering surprised oaths through bloody lips. Steve whirled like a lobo at bay, and a snarl curled his lips as he saw the sheriff trying frantically to jerk twin guns and leap backward all at the same time.

"You're a pack of liars!" he roared. "I never killed Cotter or any other man."

STEVE was leaping as he talked. His long arms shot up, then down, and the handcuffs he wore smashed savagely against the bridge of Sheriff Sim Longley's pointed nose. The sheriff was flung back against Gore, who was trying dazedly to struggle to his feet, and the pair of them went sprawling, dazed and bleeding.

Steve heard Tuck Cortland and Dick Hardy shouting curses and knew that he could never whirl on those two and smash them to the floor before they unlimbered their guns and cut him down. But Steve saw the sheriff's twin .45s lying there where they had tumbled from the officer's lax fingers and dived for them.

He struck the floor with a crash, and his manacled hands found one of the fallen guns. He brought the weapon up, cocking it, while his body shot sidewise in a swift roll. And as Steve came up like a jack-in-the-box, the gun in hand spat its message of death thunderously.

Dick Hardy's gaunt body swayed drunkenly, and his solemn face twisted slowly into a grimace of pain as he dropped two black-butted guns and clamped both bony hands to his left side.

Steve's smoke-dribbling weapon shifted a few inches, and Tuck Cortland's hawkish features turned an ashy gray as he found himself staring into the gun's muzzle. Cortland let his half drawn guns slide back into low-thonged holsters, and his hard eyes shifted uneasily under Steve's burning stare.

"Lift them guns again, and let 'em hit the floor, Cortland," Steve rasped. "Use your own judgment about tryin' to beat the drop."

Cortland cursed, drew his guns straight up until their muzzles cleared leather, then let them drop to the floor.

Steve shuttled backward until his shoulders were against the log wall, so that his weaving gun could cover the four men there in the room.

Butch Gore was on his feet now, bloody lips twisted into a snarl, big, powerful hands clawing at holstered guns. Steve let the hammer of the weapon he held fall, and a slug burned past Gore's head.

"Shed them cutters, you fool, and be careful how you move your hands," Steve rapped. "Gore, if you jerk your guns in a sudden move I'll center my next shot. That plain?"

"Steady, Butch," Tuck Cortland snapped. "This kid has the drop. Shed your guns and behave."

Gore needed little urging to behave himself. He had heard the deadly hiss of that slug, and his big hands shook as he drew twin six-guns and let them clatter to the floor.

The sheriff sat rocking to and fro, mouthing a stream of oaths and groans. His nose was broken, flattened over to the left, and the skin across his nose was laid open to the bone where the handcuff links had bitten down hardest.

The sheriff was too dazed and sick to realize what was happening. Steve began inching along the wall toward the front door, realizing that the time to high-tail was now, while the three Flying Y men were disarmed and the sheriff was not interested in prisoners or anything else.

Just where he would go when he quit the room had not occurred to Steve. Nor did he stop to think that running was admitting, in the eyes of the law, at least, that he was guilty of the murder with which the sheriff had charged him.

"You win this time, Steve Butler." Tuck Cortland almost purred the words.

"But you won't get away with it. You've not only got the law against you, but you've got the Flyin' Y to buck. My two men and me aimed to be of whatever help we could to you until you showed your fangs at us."

"I'll worry about the Flyin' Y and the law when I get around to it," Steve rasped. "Right now I've got other matters to think about, and I've got no time to spend in any jail until I hunt down four dirty, murderin' owlhoots."

"The four"—Tuck Cortland almost smiled—"who murdered your mother and uncle up at Wolf Pass day before yesterday?"

Steve started as if someone had kicked him from behind. He stared wide-eyed at the Flying Y boss for a long moment. And as Steve stood there, shocked into complete silence, the door, which was almost at his back now, opened on noiseless hinges. The lamplight from the room poured out across the log steps, outlined the great, hump-shouldered figure of a coarse, yellow-eyed man who stood there, lifting a rifle in huge paws. His loose, wet lips stretched into a slow and murderous grin.

IV

TUCK CORTLAND made a flickering, back-hand motion. The motion caught Steve's eye, but aroused no suspicion within him.

The rifle in the hands of that shaggy, misshapen giant out there on the log steps lowered. The loose-lipped mouth twisted in a grimace of disappointment, and the door closed as noiselessly as it had opened, leaving Steve Butler totally unaware that the backhand gesture of Tuck Cortland had been a signal.

"Cortland," Steve croaked, "you just mentioned the murder of my mother and uncle. How'd you know that? And come to think of it, how did you know my name? Talk up, or I'll shoot holes in your filthy hide."

"You'll do a little too much shootin' one of these days, kid," Dick Hardy snarled. "You cut a gash in my left side with a bullet a while ago. No man ever come that close to killin' me before."

"I wouldn't have come that close to *missin'* you if I'd had one of my own guns in my fist," Steve snapped. "Keep your mouth shut, Hardy. Your boss is the one I want to hear talk."

"Kid," Cortland purred, "my boys and me were for you until you got ringy with us." Cortland shrugged.

"How'd you know what happened up at Wolf Pass?" Steve cut in sharply.

"No secret about that," the Flying Y boss snorted. "Fred Babcock and some of his Circle H cow thieves were in Lookout early last night, tellin' how they lead-blasted another of my sheep outfits. You see, kid, them Circle H killers mistook your outfit for some of my sheep. Wolf Pass is on the range that Babcock claims."

"Who's this Babcock and where could a man find him?" Steve asked grimly.

"Babcock is a rancher who turned cow thief and maybe train robber, from what's told about him," Cortland answered levelly. "He's got a dozen or so long riders with him, and they stay holed up somewhere in the badlands around Wolf Pass. Nobody outside of Babcock's own bunch know just where the hideout is."

"So you run sheep," Steve said. "I figured you and your bunch for cow men, Cortland. I'm sorry I had to get ringy. But until I hunt down this Babcock and kill him, I've got no time to roost in jail. I didn't shoot Cotter. Who did, I don't know. But maybe I can get a bead on Babcock."

"They'll gun you down if you go pokin' around over there," Cortland warned. "And don't make us Flyin' Y men any madder than you have by callin' us a sheep outfit. We run a few woolies, sure. But the Flyin' Y, and every other ranch in the Syndicate that owns the Flyin' Y, is a cattle outfit."

"If you hadn't acted so proddy, the Flyin' Y would have helped yuh hunt them Circle H wide-loopers," Dick Hardy grumbled sourly.

"We ought to gun the crazy young fool!" Sheriff Sim Longley wailed. "Look what he's done to my nose with them handcuffs. We—we'll be the laughin' stock of the county if it ever gets out that we let a slick-eared kid beat the four of us."

Cortland was angry.

"Shut up!" Tuck Cortland ordered harshly. "You whinin' fool, this kid can handle a gun. Maybe, bein' a stranger, he'd have a chance to get into Babcock's camp, at that."

"If I do, and get out alive, I'll come

back and stand trial for this murder charge you've got against me, Sheriff," Steve said thickly. "I didn't kill Cotter. But I'm not goin' to jail until I've had a whirl at Babcock."

BEFORE any of the four men understood what he was doing Steve reached back, jerked the door open, and leaped out into the night. He landed on the outer edge of the log step, slammed the door shut and whirled around.

He plunged toward a shadowy corner of the log building, his eyes not yet accustomed to the dark. Steve started around a corner of the building, his mind suddenly burdened by the knowledge that he had no saddled horse ready. He remembered telling Cotter to corral and feed his dun, and remembered, too, that he had seen a corral and small barn in back of the saloon.

Steve was intent on reaching that corral in the shortest possible time when he stormed past the corner of the log saloon—and rammed violently into a hulking dark shape that loomed there before him. He heard a grunt of surprised anger, and felt himself crashing over sidewise when his ploughing bootheels failed to find purchase on the wet ground.

Steve rolled on over instinctively—and the movement saved his life! A rifle spat an orange pencil of fire at him, and he heard the bullet's thud as it struck the dirt where his body had been but a split-second before.

Steve's gun roared, hurling a slug smashing at the shadowy hulk beside the building. A mighty yell split the night, and Steve heard a rifle clatter against the log wall. He was on his feet then, darting toward a stand of timber which loomed black and solid beyond the little clearing where the saloon stood.

Steve heard a hoarse voice cursing back there beside the saloon, and knew that his blindly thrown shot had not been fatal. And almost at the same moment he heard the uneasy snorting and lunging of horses somewhere in the timber ahead of him.

He found the horses a moment later, drawn to them by their whinnying. Dawn was turning the sky milky in the east, yet here under the trees it was still pitch black.

He picked the first horse he found, lifted the trailing reins, and was starting to mount when a backward glance showed him the saloon door opening. He snatched the gun he had tucked under the waistband of his trousers and sent a slug screaming over the heads of the sheriff and Tuck Cortland, who were both trying to wedge through the door at once.

They fell back into the room in their haste to get under cover again, and Steve triggered another shot at the door, warning them not to come outside. Then he turned to the milling horses again, caught up a set of trailing reins, and started to mount. Suddenly an idea struck him and he moved quickly through the darkness, talking to the horses in low tones.

He removed the bridles from five horses and was doing some quick mental arithmetic as he finally swung up into the saddle of his chosen mount.

"Six saddled horses out here," he muttered. "The sheriff and them three Flyin' Y jiggers inside would need four of these broncs. The gent I ran into and bullet nicked outside would be a friend of theirs, likely, so he'd own another of these horses. But that's only five. Where's the sixth jigger?"

That question was bothering Steve considerably as he rode out through the black shadows of the timber. He had lashed the rumps of the horses he had unbridled with reins ends, and could hear them crashing away along the bottoms. The deep-voiced gent he had winged outside the saloon set up a racket, calling Tuck Cortland's name, and shouting that their horses were being stampeded. Steve rode on into the shadows, and cursed a little because the stirrups he had jammed his feet into were much too short for his long legs.

"I picked the sheriff's horse, I guess," he grunted. "He had the shortest legs of any of them jaspers back there."

BUT other than the discomfort of too short stirrups, Steve Butler was satisfied with the choice he had made in mounts. The horse stepped out like a good, strong animal, and Steve began working his way cautiously out of the bottom timber.

He stopped at the foot of the first hills a half hour later, dismounted and fixed the bothersome stirrups. It was daylight now, and he examined the big, blaze-faced sorrel he had "borrowed."

The sorrel was young and sound, well shod and well kept. The saddle and bridle on the horse were handtooled, bright with silver trappings. It was a good horse and a good rig, and Steve found a handful of tax due papers, letters and such matter in one of the ornate saddle pockets behind the cantle.

Steve was sweating and grim lipped when he swung up into the saddle again, for it had been difficult lengthening those stirrups with his hands linked so closely together by the handcuffs. He had searched the two big saddle pockets thoroughly, hoping that the sheriff had left the keys to the handcuffs there. But there weren't any. And Steve rode on into the hills, eyes bleak as he found the deep V-shaped notch that was Wolf Pass.

It had been more than thirty hours since he had tasted food. That, coupled with what he had been through, was making him strangely giddy and weak. Yet he knew no hunger even now. He knew only cold, numbing grief as he thought of the two lonely graves yonder beyond the pass. Then a tingling burning sensation crept through Steve as he remembered that somewhere in the broken hills and draws of the badlands beyond the pass was the hideout of the Circle H bunch he wanted to find.

Steve tickled the sorrel's sides with dull rowels, and felt the horse surge stoutly up the grade toward the pass. He glanced back uneasily, hard eyes searching the ragged slopes behind him.

The sheriff and those Flying Y men might trail him. But it would take them time, he reckoned, to find and catch their scattered horses that he had turned loose.

Steve figured he would have time enough to go back to the wrecked wagon and search out the tools that would probably be scattered around at the foot of the bluff. He wanted to find a file, and make up a roll of bedding, camp tools, and perhaps a few groceries that might not have been completely destroyed.

"Then I'll slope on into the badlands, file these bracelets off my wrists, and start huntin' Fred Babcock and his gang," he mused coldly.

He urged the mount hard, and was riding up into Wolf Pass in a little while. Steve twisted in the saddle for a final look at his back trail as he rode into the rocky notch that was Wolf Pass. And because he was looking back down the slopes instead of forward, into the pass, he failed to see his mount's ears cock forward. The sorrel slowed some, but Steve thought little of that, since it had had a hard trip up the steep ridges.

"Halt where you are, and lift your hands so we can see you!"

The voice came sharply from somewhere in the gloomy pass ahead. A hornet landing on his bare neck could have made Steve Butler jump no more violently than he jumped now.

The voice was that of a woman, and Steve whirled with such sudden motion that he lost a stirrup. He yanked back sharply on the sorrel's reins, and the gelding came to an obedient halt. Then Steve's manacled hands made a stabbing motion toward the gun in his waistband.

THE move was purely one of overtight nerves, because he had no thought of offering any powdersmoke objections if a woman wanted to hold him up. But his hands had barely moved gunward when a rifle spat thunderously from a crevice halfway down the pass. And Steve's hat went sailing from his yellow-thatched head. The sorrel reared wildly at the gun's report and Steve, already minus one stirrup, was hard put to keep in the saddle.

"Quiet that horse and watch how you move them hands, feller!" a man's voice snarled from the shadows ahead. "You make another pass at that gun I see in your belt and I'll use that sore spot between your eyes for a target."

"Then they'll be two of us shootin' at the same target," another male voice declared sourly. "And neither one of us have got a habit of missin' what we shoot at. Say, ain't them handcuffs on that jigger's wrists, Judy? Your eyes are keen. Is that feller handcuffed?"

"He is handcuffed," the girl's voice replied quickly. "And if that isn't Sim Longley's sorrel our visitor is riding then I'm in the market for a pair of specs. The sore spot between his eyes you mentioned using as a target, Link, looks like a wound."

Steve had the sorrel quieted now, and sat with manacled hands lifted before him, palms outward.

"I'm sorry about the grab I made toward my gun, lady," he called grimly. "Jumpy nerves made me reach for the six-shooter, that's all. I don't gunfight women. But I warn all of you right now that you'll have to cut me out of this saddle with lead before I'll sit here and let that rat-faced sheriff and his friends take me. I've got too much unfinished business to be roostin' in jail."

V

PEERING through eyes that were cold and unwinking Steve Butler sat there, watching three moving shadows become three people who strode up the pass toward him. One was a girl, dressed in scuffed boots, service scarred levis, flannel shirt and a pearl gray Stetson.

She carried a rifle thrust forward in slim brown hands, and there was a cartridge studded belt about her slender waist that held a holstered Colt.

The rough garb she wore failed to hide the soft curves of a healthy young body, and Steve saw that the black-haired, gray-eyed girl was breathtakingly pretty. But within Steve was that leaden ache of grief and he paid only scant attention to the girl who advanced slightly ahead of the two men.

One of those fellows, Steve noted, was short and rotund, with a round, wind-burned face and piercing eyes. The dumpy one held a six-shooter in one chubby fist. As he halted he lifted his free hand, shoved a floppy old Stetson far back, and scratched thoughtfully at a head that was completely bald.

The other man was gaunt and loose jointed, and had walked forward in a shambling, lazy gait that covered ground in a surprisingly short space of time. The gaunt fellow's bony face was screwed into a puzzled scowl, and Steve met probing dark eyes that studied him intently from beneath grizzled brows.

"I was only joking when I called you a lady-shooter." The girl smiled up at Steve now. "I had an idea you pawed at that gun before you thought how the move might look."

Steve saw her white teeth flash between full red lips.

"I meant it when I said I was sorry for havin' made the move," he told her. "And I also meant it when I said you folks would have to kill me before I'd let you turn me over to the sheriff."

"Now don't go gettin' crazy notions, young feller," the gaunt man ripped out. "Me, I'm Link Dugger. This pot-bellied thing with me is Grunt Johnson. The little lady is—"

"Judy," the girl supplied quickly. "That will do for the moment."

The girl shot a questioning look at "Grunt" Johnson and "Link" Dugger which brought puzzled frowns to their brows.

"As I read the sign, Miss Judy," Grunt said, "this young buckaroo, here, has had a batch of trouble with that snake-blooded sheriff and maybe the Flyin' Y pack of killers. He's handcuffed, his lips are swollen and split from a wallop, and he's been pecked a right smart tap between the eyes."

"Which sign shows pretty plain that the youngster has had a ruckus," Link Dugger opined. "He's mounted on Longley's sorrel, which means he escaped after bein' under arrest. Us bein' no particular friend of Longley's I figger this feller needs our help."

STEVE felt much better, somehow, for the two men were obviously trying to view him as a friend.

"My arms are tired, and I'm puttin' my hands down to the saddle-horn," Steve said heavily. "If you want to use that as an excuse to shoot me, then blast away."

Steve's hands came down, locked over the saddle-horn, and his taut face and hard eyes defied the three people in the trail to do anything about it.

"Who are you, and what sort of trouble have you had?" Judy asked bluntly.

"The name, miss, is Steve Butler," he answered. Then without mentioning that his mother and uncle were murdered, he told of reaching the log saloon on the bank of the river the day before.

"I was pretty well tuckered out," he finished. "I told Cotter to put up my pony, then went to sleep. The sheriff woke me toward daylight this mornin', slapped handcuffs on me, and told me I was under arrest for murder."

"Murder?" the two men and the girl echoed in one breath.

He nodded grimly and quickly he told the whole story: how he had first met Luke Cotter, the murder, his arrest, of the fight and of his escape.

WHEN Butler had finished, the girl frowned, as if puzzled. "But why would the sheriff and Tuck Cortland go to all the trouble of framing you?" she asked wonderingly. "Did you ever have any sort of dealings with them before, Steve Butler?"

"Never laid eyes on them until today, miss," Steve told her. "And Cotter was plenty chipper the last I saw him. But this mornin', he was out there on the floor, shot through— Say! That was strange!"

Steve's last words came in an altered voice.

"What's the matter?" Link Dugger demanded sharply.

Steve came out of his abstraction. He looked down at them with eyes that were harder, brighter than ever.

"I just thought of somethin', how Cotter looked there on the floor," he said excitedly. "The back of his shirt was covered with blood, but that bloody shirt was dry and stiff. And there wasn't a bit of blood showin' anywhere on the boards around the body!"

"I get what you mean!" Judy cried. "You think that Cotter wasn't killed in the saloon or there would have been plenty of blood on the floor, and his shirt would still have been wet."

"Say, what's eatin' you?" Link Dugger said, gaping at the girl.

"That's it," Steve said, grinning. "That dried shirt and no blood on the floor means that Luke Cotter was killed away from the saloon a good many hours before I saw his body."

Grunt had a look of sudden comprehension on his face.

"By thunder, I see it now," he declared. "And you can bet your bottom dollar, Butler, that Sheriff Longley and his Flyin' Y friends killed Cotter in order to frame you for the murder."

"Forget it," Steve said, his interest suddenly dying. "Right now I've got more important things to think about than tryin' to figure out if I was framed and why."

"What?" Grunt Johnson gasped. "What could be more important than tryin' to get your neck out of a noose, I'd like to know?"

Steve felt suddenly dizzy, and everything spun wildly before his eyes. Weakness from not having eaten in so long and the memory of those two graves beyond the pass were getting the best of him. But he fought bravely against the faintness and nausea, forced his sagging shoulders to straighten. He was still a little dizzy.

"My own troubles can wait," he said thickly. "Right now, I've got to get into the badlands yonder and hunt down four men. I'll kill 'em or get killed tryin' it. Their leader especially."

"Who are you talkin' about?" Link Dugger growled, in a tone that should have warned Steve Butler. But Steve's head was swimming more madly than ever, and things were blurring fast before his eyes.

"I've got to go," he croaked. "Get out of my way and let me ride on. Got to find that dirty, murderin' Fred Babco—"

The name almost escaping from his lips brought Steve up short, sent a hot current of warning through him. His brain suddenly cleared, his sagging body snapped erect—and he found two pairs of cocked six-guns and one rifle levelled at him. Behind those five guns were three tensed faces, and three pairs of burning, alarmed eyes.

"He started to say 'Fred Babcock,' no question of that," Judy said nervously. "And he called Dad a murderer, just as those Flying Y devils speak of him."

"Dad?" The word passed Steve's twitching lips at last.

"Yes!" the girl blazed. "Fred Babcock is my father. Oh, don't look so thunderstruck. You aren't the first dry-gulcher who has come snooping on our range and been tripped up."

"You'll see Fred Babcock, all right, Butler," Link promised. "Only not the way you hoped. Fred Babcock swore to give the next Flyin' Y skunk we ketched on Circle H range a regular trial, like an honest court. You'll be the first."

DESPERATION alerted the nerves of Steve Butler, keened his wits. He stared down at the three people before him out of eyes that were slitted, burning with rage. And in that moment Steve took the sort of a gamble than only a fool or an extremely desperate man will take. He ripped spurs along the flanks of the sorrel horse, whooped at the top of his lungs, and flung his lean body forward along the bronc's neck.

The big sorrel plunged at Steve's captors with flattened ears and rolling eyes,

and the two old cowpunchers forgot about the guns they gripped and tried to leap clear. But the sorrel drove hard between them, dealt them swiping blows that sent them tumbling end-over-end.

Behind him, a rifle cracked, and a bullet buzzed testily past Steve's bent shoulders. The girl was shooting, yet Steve felt somehow that her nerve would desert her when it came to drawing a killing bead on him.

The fact that two more slugs sang past without touching him seemed to bear out his hunch. Then the sorrel took a sharp turn in the pass, and Steve jerked up erect in the saddle, began hauling back on reins. Ahead of him were three saddled horses, beginning to plunge out of the way as the sorrel skidded toward them on braced legs.

Steve hopped down out of the saddle, trailed the sorrel's reins, and ran to the three prancing mounts. He stripped a rifle from its sheath on one of the saddles, saw that the gun had a cartridge showing in the chamber when he opened the breech slightly. Then he hastily stripped the bridles from the three horses and sent them galloping down the pass. He hopped back into his own saddle as fast as he could move, and raced after the galloping mounts.

"Too bad, havin' to make a lady walk," he muttered. "But her an' them two old rannihans would be on my tail in nothin' flat if I didn't."

He watched the horses rush out of the pass, saw them head down the wagon road at a good clip. Then he turned right, his face ashen as he followed the tracks of the wagon that had gone crashing over the rim the day before.

Steve was at the wreckage a few minutes later, making up a bundle of what food stuff was still edible. He stood for a moment between the two sodden graves.

He picked up the supplies he had rolled into two muddy blankets, and tied the bundle behind the sorrel's saddle. Then Steve mounted, his uncle's hat pulled low to shade his burning eyes as he rode away.

He pulled a file from inside his shirt —a file he had taken from the crushed tool box that he had found. And, as he rode up out of the canyon and into the timber of a ridge, Steve Butler was trying to figure out some way of bringing the file into contact with the links of the handcuffs he wore. But he discovered it was out of the question, and began looking for a stump or fallen tree.

He soon found a lightning blasted pine that suited his purpose, and dismounted beside it. Driving the butt of the file into a crevice in the torn tree trunk, he hammered it solidly into place with a rock. Then he began sawing those handcuff links, putting on all the power he could.

VI

AFTER what seemed to be the work of hours the file won through the chain, and Steve staggered back, lowering his numbed arms gratefully. His wrists were still circled by bands of steel, but his movements were no longer hampered.

"Food, that's what I need," he muttered. "Got to eat some grub right now before I do anything else."

After eating, his mind grew clearer. He began to see now that the trouble he had run into with Cortland threatened to seriously handicap his hunt for those four riders that murdered his mother and uncle.

"Blast that rat-faced sheriff," he snarled. "He'll outlaw me now, maybe put a price on my scalp. And Fred Babcock will know that I'm ridin' his sign now, too. But is Babcock the man I want?"

Steve was beginning to do some serious thinking about the whole affair. Tuck Cortland had sworn that he and his men meant to help. Yet, they had named Fred Babcock as the murderer of Steve's mother and uncle. But *not* until Steve had held the upper hand. They had shown no friendship as long as he stood handcuffed and gunless. He remembered that now as he gathered his camp tools, tied them behind the sorrel's saddle, and mounted once more.

As he rode toward the river below the hills, Steve was thinking of Judy Babcock and her two grizzled friends. Judy and the two Circle H riders had instantly accused Tuck Cortland and the sheriff of framing Steve for the murder of Luke Cotter. That made sense to Steve, since he was innocent of the murder.

On top of that was the fact that Cotter's body had obviously been brought into the saloon and dumped down upon

the floor several hours after he had been killed. On the other hand, Tuck Cortland and Fred Babcock were evidently at loggerheads. That being the case, either side would jump at a chance to make trouble for the other.

"A man couldn't just take the word of either side," Steve muttered. "I've got to check their stories, and check 'em mighty careful. If I can dodge a noose long enough, I can sift the truth out of this mess."

Steve knew that the sheriff's fancy gear and fine sorrel horse would be well known through these hills. He'd have to get another mount. And he had to have guns.

An hour later, Steve rode into the heavy bottom timber along the Missouri River and tied his mount securely to a tree. Then he traveled a quarter of a mile on foot, the rifle clutched in his hands. Finally he approached the saloon that had belonged to Luke Cotter.

LUKE COTTER'S body still lay there on the floor. Steve found his double belts and holstered six-guns in the bedroom where he had slept, and quickly buckled them on with a sigh of relief. He picked up his jacket, shrugged into it, started for the front door, the rifle he had taken from the Circle H waddies tucked under his arm. But in passing Luke Cotter's corpse, Steve caught a glimpse of something that stopped him. He stared for a moment, then squatted on his haunches beside the dead man, excitement tingling through him as he studied Cotter's blood-caked shirt.

Plastered to the cloth by blood that had dried there were pine needles—a good many of them. He pulled several loose, examined them. Then he saw that there were other pine needles caught in Cotter's frowsy hair.

Steve's brown eyes were gleaming slits when he stood up, facing the door.

"Pine needles," he ground out. "This proves Cotter wasn't killed here." But he was puzzled. "There's plenty of red willow and cottonwood along this bottom, but no pines."

Steve stalked to the door, glanced hastily about, then stepped outside. At the corral he caught and saddled his own dun.

On a sudden hunch he went into the small barn, began examining the two saddles which hung from wall pegs. His keen eyes found what he hoped he might find there—a saddle that was smeared with blood! Someone had tried to wipe the blood off the saddle, but had evidently made a bad job of it.

"Cotter rode off some place after I got down here yesterday," Steve decided. "Them pine needles that stuck to his shirt means that he rode up into the hills, since pine trees are up there. Somebody killed Luke Cotter, then lugged his body back down to the saloon. Yep, that sheriff was sure tryin' to frame me!"

Steve stalked out of the barn, mounted his dun and went after the sheriff's horse. He turned the sorrel into the corral a few minutes later, hung the sheriff's gear on the pole corral, then rode across the bottom heading toward the pass.

It was well after midday when he reached the far end of the pass. Steve's burning eyes swept out and down, taking in a deep curve of rich river bottom land.

There was a ferry down there, and Steve watched the big clumsy thing slide lazily up to the river bank nearest him. A buckboard rolled off the ferry and turned along a road which slanted down the river for several yards before swinging into the mouth of a shallow valley which cut back into the badlands.

Steve was watching the buckboard without any interest when he saw a rider bolt out of a thicket and race toward the vehicle. The lone man in the buckboard turned, brought up a hand in quick salute. Steve Butler's face tightened—because the rider who overhauled the vehicle was Judy Babcock!

The girl was leaning sideways in the saddle, obviously talking to the tall man who drove the buckboard. Then suddenly a muffled cry burst from Steve's throat.

Five horsemen popped over a low ridge above the valley road, went tearing down the ridge, the sun glinting on unsheathed guns as they jumped their spur-maddened horses over the rocks and sped through thickets. These five riders who were charging after the buckboard and the girl who rode beside it were Sheriff Sim Longley, Tuck Cortland, and three of his men!

JUST as Steve Butler reined in atop the low ridge overlooking the valley

road, the buckboard came to a halt. Judy Babcock was kneeling beside one of the rear wheels, her rifle streaming lead toward a brush patch at the base of the slope. Seated on the buckboard a gaunt, white-maned old gent was struggling furiously to keep the black team from bolting.

Even in the brief glimpse Steve noticed that the old man in the buckboard was hampered by a right leg that stuck out stiffly against the dashboard.

Suddenly a slug from the thicket at the foot of the slope ripped up the dirt in front of Judy, showering her with spurts of earth. In a flash Steve Butler jumped out of the saddle, laid the barrel of his rifle over a boulder, and squeezed the trigger. Above the crack of the gun, a thin howl of pained surprise screamed through the air, and Sheriff Sim Longley came sailing out of the thicket, clawing at his side as if he had a shirt full of hornets.

The sheriff pitched headlong into a ditch full of muddy water. Steve trained his gun on the thicket again, raking the brush.

The hump-backed hombre stormed out of the lower edge of the thicket, Tuck Cortland hard on his heels. Dick Hardy slid out of the bushes like a snake directly below Steve, his guns sweeping up. Steve triggered a shot that knocked the drygulcher's hat off, and Hardy's nerve deserted him.

He wheeled and ran madly around the thicket toward Tuck Cortland and the hump-backed man, who were already clambering up their mounts.

Steve hammered out his remaining cartridges as Butch Gore and Dick Hardy straddled leather and sunk spurs. The four mounted toughs were tearing away then, hunched over the flying manes of their horses as Judy Babcock and the old gent in the buckboard sent a parting volley after them.

Holding his empty rifle, Steve hit the saddle in a single bound, and sent the dun galloping down the rough slope, his eyes following the staggering, thoroughly drenched sheriff. Sheriff Longley had crawled out of the ditch, got his bearings, and was trying frantically to get around the thicket to his waiting horse. But Steve got there first and leveled a six-shooter at the sheriff's head as he reined in the dun. Sim Longley pawed at empty holsters, shouting oaths and tried to dodge past. But the tall tow-head leaned sidewise in his saddle, chopped down once with the six-gun, and leaped from the saddle when the sheriff lay sprawled on the damp earth.

VII

STEVE was lifting the sheriff, slinging him roughly on the horse that stood over trailing reins, when Judy Babcock rode around the thicket.

"You!" she said, staring while Steve deftly lashed the moaning sheriff's feet beneath the bronc's belly.

"Yeah, it's me," Steve panted.

Steve mounted, hauled in the reins of the brown pony he had tied the sheriff onto, and rode out into the valley.

The white-haired man had swung the team back into the road, and was watching Steve out of gray eyes that were keen and alert. There was blood along the old fellow's left cheek, and Steve noticed again how his right leg poked out stiffly against the dashboard.

"I don't know who you are, young feller, but Judy and me owe our lives to you," the old fellow said shakily. "I sure do, for Cortland would have killed me, that's certain."

"I'm right behind you, Steve Butler, and the rifle I have is cocked," Judy Babcock warned tensely. "That man in the buckboard is my father, Fred Babcock."

For a moment Steve Butler sat there, eyes searching Fred Babcock's seamed red-smeared face. Suddenly Steve swung around in the saddle, his blazing eyes lashing at Sheriff Sim Longley.

Longley was shivering from something beside the ducking he had had, and his eyes shifted nervously under Steve's boring stare.

"You and Tuck Cortland lied to me this mornin'," Steve growled. "You framed me for murder, then sent me out huntin' Fred Babcock."

The sheriff shook his head. "Cortland lied, not me," he pleaded. "I never told you nothin' about Babcock. I knowed Cortland was lyin' when he accused Babcock, for a bullet busted Fred's right leg about a month ago and he ain't been on a horse since."

Steve was amazed at the change that came over this spike-nosed little badge man. Sim Longley looked plenty sick, and his eyes shifted uneasily behind the

swollen flesh but he seemed more ashamed than afraid, and Steve realized suddenly that the sheriff was telling the truth.

"This is the first time I've been off my ranch since Cortland and some of his rotten bunch bush-whacked me an' broke my leg with a slug," Babcock snorted. "But what in blazes is this all about?"

Judy Babcock edged her horse closer to Steve's bronc. There was a pleading look in her eyes.

"You no longer believe whatever it was you were told about Dad, Steve?" she asked slowly.

"Not now," Steve said. "If Fred Babcock, there, is a woman-killer, then I'll eat this horse I'm sittin', saddle and all."

"Woman-killer!" Judy gasped. "Steve Butler, what on earth are you saying?"

"You, Butler!" Fred Babcock said sharply. "Explain yourself. If anybody has accused me of murderin' anybody, man or woman, I want to know about it."

"It's about them sheep that was shot up on yore range at Wolf Pass, and the wagon that was run over the rim," the sheriff put in swiftly. "Fred, I heard Tuck Cortland tell this Butler feller, here, that you and your men had been in Lookout, braggin' about wipin' out a sheep outfit that drifted onto your range."

Babcock gave Steve a long, stern glance.

"Spit it out, Butler," Babcock growled. "What do you know about them dead sheep and that busted wagon up on my range?"

MEMORY of the tragedy turned Steve's face chalk white.

"I was there when it happened," he croaked. "I dug—and filled them two graves."

"You helped kill them people you buried?" Fred Babcock snapped threateningly.

"Hardly," Steve said. "Those graves hold the bodies of Tom Welton, my uncle, and Anna Butler, my mother. My uncle was shot to ribbons and my mother was crushed to death when four men ran the wagon over the rimrock."

"Lordy, son, no wonder you started gunnin' for me," old Fred Babcock groaned. "But are you plumb satisfied that I ain't a woman-killin' skunk like you was told?"

"I'm satisfied," Steve answered levelly. "Your crippled leg proves that you couldn't have been mixed up in what happened at Wolf Pass. I'm sorry I accused you."

Fred Babcock stuck out his hand and shook hands with Steve.

"Come home with us, Steve," Judy said huskily. "Mother and I will try to—to lighten your sorrow all we can."

"Sure, boy, come along," Fred Babcock chimed in heartily. "I don't know what you want with that spike-nosed thing you've captured, there, but fetch it along, if you want."

"I don't blame you for bein' sore at me, Fred," Sheriff Longley said wearily. "I've let you and the other honest men who elected me down pretty hard, I reckon. I'm not a crook. I just straddled the fence as long as I could, Fred. Trouble is, I fell off and lit on the wrong side."

"Yeah, Cortland's side." The Circle H owner spat out venomously, contempt in his eyes.

"On Cortland's side," the sheriff agreed. "But I'm not stayin' there."

"Why did you help frame a murder charge onto me?" Steve Butler demanded bluntly.

Sheriff Sim Longley sighed wearily. "All I know about you bein' charged with murderin' Luke Cotter, Butler, is that Cortland, Butch Gore, Dick Hardy and Humpy Morgan, routed me out of bed at two o'clock this mornin' and told me that some stranger had murdered Luke Cotter and was asleep in Cotter's bed. So I arrested Steve Butler, as was my duty. Later he escaped." He turned blood-shot eyes toward Babcock. "Frank, Cortland had accused you of murderin' that sheep outfit up there on the rim, by drivin' their wagon over the cliff. So I tried to arrest you—and you know what happened. That's all there is to it."

"No, it's not," contradicted Butler. Rapidly he sketched out what he had discovered—Luke Cotter's blood-stained shirt, the lack of blood stains on the saloon floor, the pine needles—everything.

"You can easily find out that what I am saying is all true," Butler said, "by going back to the saloon and looking at the floor and his body yourself. The evidence is still there. The blood-stained

saddle is still in the stable."

"I'll do that," the sheriff agreed. "As soon as I can. All this makes it look bad for Tuck Cortland and his friends."

Frank Babcock nodded. "Pine needles, eh?" he mused. "If that's correct, then Cotter was killed up in the hills, just as you say. You ought to investigate right away, Sim."

Butler surveyed Sheriff Longley with unrelenting hostility. "What you have said sounds grand," he snapped. "But why did you shoot at this gal and her dad?"

"I wasn't shootin' at Fred and Judy," the sheriff said. "I was tryin' to stop Cortland and them other three when you took a hand in the ruckus."

Steve glared at the pleading badge-toter, then turned to Judy, who was still beside him. "Judy, you and your dad better sift out of here, now," he said quietly.

AFTER a glance at Butler's grim expression, Fred Babcock made a hasty motion to Judy, and sent his buckboard rolling out along the valley road. The girl hesitated for a moment, then rode after her father.

Sheriff Sim Longley had not lied when he claimed that he had not been firing at Fred and Judy Babcock. Steve Butler found the sheriff's crumpled Stetson and two six-shooters there at the edge of the brush patch. He retrieved the guns and the hat, examining the two .45s carefully. Neither weapon had been fired, and Steve felt somewhat relieved. He punched the shells out of the guns, jammed them into the sheriff's holsters, and handed the lawman his battered hat.

"You didn't lie about not shootin' at the Babcocks," Steve said bluntly. "But why didn't you stop Cortland and them others? It ain't your fault that Babcock and his girl didn't get killed."

The sheriff winced, but offered no excuse.

Steve cut the sheriff's feet free from the rope that bound them together, swung up into his saddle, and reached out a lean hand to the sheriff. "Hand over the keys that'll fit these busted handcuffs I'm wearin'," he demanded.

The sheriff produced the keys, and a few moments later Steve tossed the ruined handcuffs into the brush, then slung the keys after them.

"We're goin' down yonder to that ferry, Longley," he said grimly. "I aim to ask the hombre who runs that outfit a few questions. You keep your mouth shut! You hear me?"

"I ain't deaf, Butler," the sheriff grunted, and lifted his mount's reins wearily.

Steve rode behind him as they quit the valley and went out into the river bottom at a fast trot. The ferry was anchored on their side of the river, and Steve's eyes settled on a little man who waved at them as they approached.

"The gent wavin' to us is Ben Storm," the sheriff told Steve. "He owns the ferry."

Ben Storm began preparing for them to ride onto the Ferry, but Steve stopped him. "We ain't crossin' this creek," he told Storm. "All we want is a little information from you."

Storm stepped up onto the bank, his moon-face blank. But Steve saw the ferryman's keen eyes travel swiftly over the sodden sheriff.

"Who wants to know what?" Storm asked cagily.

"I want to know about Luke Cotter," Steve said coldly. "When did you see him last, and who was with him?"

"It's all right, Ben," Sheriff Longley spoke up. "This boy has been framed for murder. I'm satisfied that it is a frame-up. But unless I can get hold of some facts to kill the charge, Steve Butler, here, will have to stand trial, or ride the owlhoot the rest of his life."

"I seen Luke twice yesterday," the ferryman admitted. "Along about the middle of the mornin' he rode down here and I ferried him over to the other side. Luke was a little soused, and he kept talkin' about how solid he'd be with Tuck Cortland and the Flyin' Y after he told them somethin' he had found out."

"That all he said?" Steve asked tersely.

"That was about all," Storm said. "I let Cotter off the ferry, and didn't see him no more until the afternoon. Him and Humpy Morgan come to the ferry. They was both pretty drunk. I fetched 'em to this side, an' they rode up the hill trail yonder toward Fenchman's Pass. Humpy Morgan come back in about a half hour, and I ferried him back acrost to the far side. That help you any, Butler?"

"Plenty!" Steve snapped out, and shot a sidelong glance at Sim Longley.

The sheriff was pale and his lips twitched nervously.

"If Humpy Morgan was gone only half an hour, he didn't have time to pack Luke Cotter's body to the saloon at Cow Thief Crossin'," the sheriff said.

"Cotter's body?" Storm asked sharply. "You mean somethin' happened to that tough little whisky peddler, Sim?"

"He was shot through the back," Steve put in coldly. "Cotter was killed up in the hills, then packed to his saloon and dumped on the floor. And I'm charged with murderin' Luke Cotter."

VIII

BEN STORM looked on, wide-eyed.

"Humpy Morgan done that murder," the sheriff said thinly. "But who carried Cotter's body back to the saloon?"

"I reckon I can answer that," Storm said explosively. "Around midnight, maybe not quite that late, Tuck Cortland and Butch Gore come acrost the river. They was talkin' about goin' up to Luke Cotter's place to see if maybe Luke didn't have a shindig goin' on.

"They come back in about two hours, hollerin' for me to hustle the ferry acrost. They said somethin' about havin' to see you in a hurry, Sim."

The sheriff looked at Steve. "Butler, can you figger this thing out?"

"Sure!" Steve said. "Mumpy Morgan tolled Cotter off yonder into them pines and murdered him. Then Cortland and Gore came along a good while later, and carried Cotter's body to the saloon. After that, they hustled you out of bed, told you that I was asleep at Cotter's place, and framed that murder charge against me."

"But why?" the sheriff asked. "Why would a gent like Cortland bother to frame a plumb stranger like you, Steve? It don't make sense."

Steve's face was outwardly calm, but a raging hell boiled in his heart. "It's beginnin' to make sense, Sheriff," he said. "When I rode down to Cotter's place the other day I was pretty sick and shook up. I told Cotter I was trailin' four men who had murdered my mother and uncle and I asked him if he'd seen four hombres late the day before. Cotter said he hadn't seen any four riders, but I've a hunch he lied, Longley. I think that he knowed who I was lookin' for."

The sheriff and Ben Storm were straining toward Steve, their eyes burning with excitement.

"Them four riders had rode into the river there at Cotter's place," Steve went on. "Luke Cotter was bound to have seen them dirty bushwhackers. Why I didn't figure that out before is something I'll never know. But I'm sure that Tuck Cortland, Butch Gore, Dick Hardy and Humpy Morgan murdered my folks up at Wolf Pass."

Storm nodded in agreement.

"Sim, this boy has got a sound argument there," Ben Storm exclaimed. "Luke Cotter crossed the river in the mornin', braggin' that he'd be in solid with Cortland, which supports that argument."

"Thanks," Steve told him through clenched teeth.

Steve spun his dun, galloped away. Both the sheriff and Ben Storm yelled wildly after him.

"Where you goin'?" Longley howled. "Butler, don't be a fool. This is a job for the law to handle."

With a snarl of anger for his answer, Steve Butler spurred his horse and raced into the bottom timber. His lips were tight, his face hard as he rode. He had a hunch he would find Cortland and the Flying Y bunch at Luke Cotter's saloon at Cow Thief Crossing.

A half hour later his lips twisted back into a bitter smile when he saw light streaming through the windows of Luke Cotter's saloon.

Steve circled behind the place, then dismounted and ground-tied his pony. Quietly, he stripped the spurs from his heels, tested his guns against holster drag, and moved through the night with the stealth of a stalking puma. He heard a low mutter of voices as he reached the saloon's log wall.

At a window, Steve peered in cautiously, and sucked in his breath as he caught sight of a hump-backed fellow serving whisky across the sway-backed bar to Tuck Cortland, Dick Hardy and Buck Gore.

Cortland's hawkish features were as black as a thundercloud, and he stood leaning sidewise against the bar, fingering a glass of white whisky in one hand.

"Killin' that woman put the Injun

sign on us," Butch Gore declared uneasily. "If we ain't careful, we'll wind up danglin' from a cottonwood."

"Shut your mouth, Butch," Tuck Cortland cut in savagely. "How did any of us know that one of them people on the wagon seat was a woman? Through the rain and mist all we could see was two slickers, Stetsons slanted down over their faces. We didn't know one a woman."

"That's right," Dick Hardy said. "When Humpy drove a slug into the feller who was handlin' the hosses none of us knowed the other rider was a woman. Not until them hosses stampeded, and we heard her scream."

BUTCH GORE wagged his head and scowled.

"Just the same, we killed that woman," he said.

"And it jinxed us. That Butler kid made us run like rabbits a while ago. It was him shootin' at us. I seen him. And now Butler an' Fred Babcock have got the sheriff."

"What if they have?" Cortland growled. "Sim Longley hasn't got a thing on us. But we're takin' no chances. Humpy, pour us another round. Then we're ridin' over to the Circle H. The four of us can Injun up to the ranchhouse an' throw enough slugs through the windows to kill Babcock, that spineless sheriff an' the Butler kid."

"More killin'," Butch Gore bit out shrilly, and there was something of a maniac in his rolling eyes. He sleeved away the sweat that showed along his upper lip and forehead.

Tuck Cortland, Morgan and Hardy were staring at Gore, slow to realize that straining nerves were cracking the man's sanity.

Gore saw their stares, and laughed in a shaky, wild scream. He lifted his glass and tried to down the drink, but his palsied hand spilled the whisky, and he flung the glass down with a shrill curse.

"I keep hearin' it!" he wailed. "I keep hearin' that woman's scream when she felt the wagon goin' over the rimrock. If only she hadn't screamed!"

"Shut your mouth, Gore!" Tuck Cortland yelled.

He drove a hard fist into Gore's face, and the man fell back against the bar, dazed and almost knocked out. Blood ran from his nose and mouth, and he made whimpering sounds while his glazed eyes rolled slowly right and left.

"Get hold of yourself, Butch!" Tuck Cortland rasped. "Throw another slug of corn whisky into your belly and act sensible. Then we'll ride to—"

Cortland swiveled on one heel, the whisky glass spilling from his fingers. Behind the bar huge shaggy-headed Humpy Morgan stood gaping stupidly, a jug cocked over one elbow, a glass half lifted. White whisky trickled from the mouth of the jug, but Humpy Morgan did not notice that.

Dick Hardy put his glass down slowly upon the bar, and the frozen-faced killer's eyes began narrowing down to worried slits. Steve Butler was there in the room, a tall, thin shadow, showing just within the doorway which led into the lean-to.

Steve's eyes flicked once to the now blanket-covered body of Luke Cotter, where it still lay upon the floor. Then those slitted eyes flashed back to the Flying Y men.

"Cortland, you and these three with you murdered my mother and my uncle up at Wolf Pass the other day," Steve droned in a hard voice. "You also murdered Luke Cotter, and tried to frame me."

Steve had been watching Dick Hardy without appearing to do so. And suddenly Steve's voice ended in a sound of brittle laughter.

Humpy Morgan had dropped the jug at last, and as the vessel crashed against the floor Dick Hardy's practiced hands moved with a deadly speed toward holstered guns. But Steve Butler had seen that lightninglike move.

Steve's own hands dipped, sprang up, and from the level of his lean thighs red banners of powder blaze reached out from the gloom that shrouded him. Then red hell ruled that room, with the cries of cursing men shrilling above the roar of six-guns.

Steve saw Dick Hardy fold over jerkily, as if someone had kicked the frozen-faced gunman in the stomach. But the guns were spilling from Hardy's hands as he bent, and he kept leaning forward until his writhing face smashed against the floor.

STEVE wasted no motion in shifting or trying to dodge. He simply leaned

forward a little above bucking guns, weaving under the impact of lead that ripped his thigh and side and left shoulder. But always those slitted eyes were searching the powder fog of that room, and always Steve's thumbs were cramped over gun hammers, ready to fire when he sighted a target.

It seemed like hours that the roaring blasts beat against his eardrums, while his straining eyes sought those milling, twisting shadows out there in the powder fog. Steve saw Humpy Morgan dash out from behind the bar, a blazing Colt in each massive fist. He shot at Morgan's yellow eyes, and watched the great, shaggy head snap sharply backward.

Humpy Morgan fell, dead. And Steve's guns flung leaden death at another twisting, weaving shadow that was fading away down the room behind spouting weapons. Steve heard an unearthly squall of fear and pain burst from the wraithlike figure, and felt the floor vibrate when a body struck.

It was over then, and for the first time Steve realized that he had fought with only three of the four killers. Butch Gore still stood at the bar, his eyes the glazed, bulging eyes of a man who completely failed to understand what was going on about him.

"You, Gore!" Steve called. "Either lift your hands, or reach for your guns."

Butch Gore suddenly whirled away from the bar, went running blindly down the room. He started out from the front door, crazy laughter pouring from his gaping mouth. But as he started out into the night he came to a jarring halt, jerked at the guns on his thighs. But from the black night beyond the doorway guns yammered mightily, and Gore fell back into the doorway, limp in death.

Steve Butler fought the nausea and shakiness that seized him, and watched the door through pain-dulled eyes while his fingers fumbled fresh cartridges into the hot guns he held. Steve leaned against the door-jamb, teeth grinding under the red surge of pain that tore through his side and thigh and shoulder. He saw a shadowy movement behind the open front door now, and the guns in his hands snapped up again, cocked.

"Steve! Steve Butler! Are you all right? Can you hear me, Steve?"

Steve laughed shakily, lowered the hammers of his guns and slid them into holsters. It was Judy Babcock out there calling to him, and suddenly peace and a sense of happiness came over him.

"Don't come in here," he called out. "This place ain't exactly tidy. I'm comin' out—Judy. You wait there."

A FIGURE sprang up into the doorway, then another and another. The first to enter was Sheriff Sim Longley, gripping a gun in each slim fist. The second man inside the room was Ben Storm, the river ferryman.

The sheriff stared pop-eyed at Tuck Cortland, Humpy Morgan and Dick Hardy—three sprawled, glassy-eyed desperadoes who had tripped their last murder trigger. The sheriff yammered something to Steve about having drilled Butch Gore as the chunky killer tried to stampede into the night. But Steve did not listen. Swaying on his feet and sick from wounds, something was pulling him on toward that door, and the cool night beyond it.

He noticed that the third man to enter the door was dumpy, bald-headed Grunt Johnson, whom he'd met up in Wolf Pass that morning. Grunt's face was skinned along one side, there was a lump over one bright eye, and he limped. But he grinned up at Steve twistedly, laid a friendly hand on the tall puncher's arm.

"You almost killed Link Dugger and me when you ran that horse over us," Grant chuckled. "If you think I'm skinned up, just wait until you see Link. He sprained both his ankles and twisted his long neck. He's grouchier than a bee-stung grizzly, and he'll tell it scary about what he aims to do to you for stavin' him up so bad. But don't mind Link's grouch, son. You just waltz on outside to where the finest little gal in the world is worryin' herself sick for fear a certain yaller-haired, bone-headed cowboy by the name of Steve Butler is mebbe hurt serious."

"Thanks, Grunt," Steve husked, and was smiling a little despite the pain of bullet-torn flesh as he limped out into the cool Montana night.

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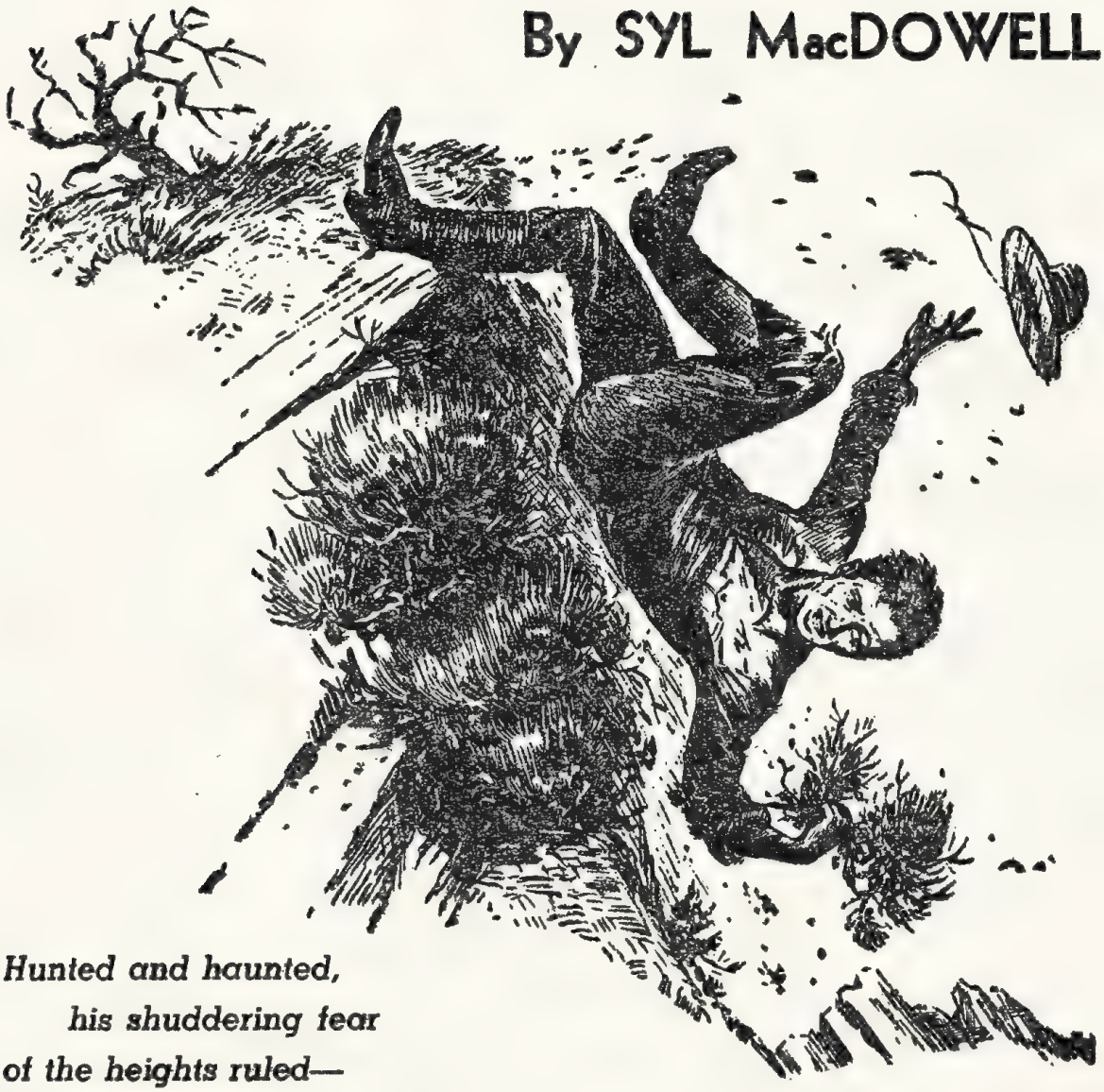
By SYL MacDOWELL



Hunted and haunted,
his shuddering fear
of the heights ruled—

THE BUTCHERBIRD

FOR a man who could bend a cold horseshoe in his bare hands, it was easy to reach through the bars and strangle the unwary old jailer, Pop Parkins. It was easier still for Shrike Satus to seize his keys, unlock the cell, escape through the jail office, steal a saddled horse in the street and flee into the night.

Not until morning did Sheriff Cheney learn that his slippery prisoner was on the loose. That discovery came with the shocking spectacle of Pop Parkins' body stiff in death against the open cell door, held there by his own belt tightly buckled around his lean, grizzled throat.

Satus exulted in such gruesome deeds. In all his shocking career he never had

been satisfied by plain murder. Desecration of the dead was his favorite sport. Once a rancher he had robbed and shot was found in the middle of a field, propped upright on a pitchfork, like a scarecrow.

For such fiendishness, and his elusive cunning, Shrike Satus came to be known among lawmen and on wanted posters as "The Butcherbird," so-named after the feathered predator that impales grasshoppers and other insect prey on mesquite thorns and barbed wire fences.

By morning the fugitive was high in the Rimrock wilderness. Although unpursued as yet, he had not escaped unscathed. During his flight a discomforting mishap had befallen him. On a precarious climb along a narrow shelf trail he had hugged the inside too closely and collided in the dark against a jagged rock.

The penalty was a painfully wrenched shoulder. So the Butcherbird, for all his lucky getaway, was in no jubilant mood when he reached his objective on the high and rugged crest.

It was a well chosen robber's roost, because it commanded a wide view of the country that tumbled for miles in all directions, and because there was a small, hidden spring just under the rim, the only water within many miles.

In times past, the Butcherbird had made a retreat on that lofty crest. Cached nearby was an emergency supply of canned food.

Picketing his gaunt and jaded horse in a grassy draw above the spring, the killer perched on the lookout point and munched a hunk of bread he had saved out of his jail ration and hidden inside his shirt. It was dry and unpalatable by now. Grumbling at the poor fare provided prisoners, he flung away the crusts scornfully and crawled to the shade of a stunted juniper that grew near the rim.

BY ransacking the jail office, he had armed himself with a six-shooter, loaded and holstered on a well-filled gunbelt. That he hung on a low limb, in easy reach, and bedded down.

But he could neither sleep nor rest, on account of the nagging ache in his injured shoulder. So painful was it that he didn't try to unsaddle the stolen horse. He was wholly unconcerned by any thought of the animal's discomfort. Cruelty was the habit of this creedless criminal. Without a twinge of pity he could ride a horse until it dropped, and often had.

Besides, a horse saddled and ready might become needful if the Sheriff should come, as well he might if the Butcherbird lingered long on the Rimrock. And stay he must, until he regained normal activity. By now it was painfully plain that the torn ligament could not endure the rigors of long, hard travel.

Restless and irritable, the Butcherbird brooded over his one persistent weakness that had led to the accident. It was because he had an inborn dread of high places that he had leaned too close to the inside of the ledge trail.

He had always cringed from steep depths. And he was disturbed by the realization that his dread had steadily become more acute with the increase of his atrocities. If told that he was afflicted with acrophobia, the Butcherbird would have been befuddled by the word. That fear of falling was the only fear of this ruthless rascal, unawed by man, beast, reptile or conscience. Except when hard-pressed, as now, he shunned the Rimrock and all other hill country.

So he felt vaguely insecure, although his lookout perch was solid enough except for the crevice where the juniper was rooted in slabrock that extended some ten feet in front of him. There it crumbled, becoming a short, sharp slope that spilled to the brink.

Under the juniper the Butcherbird squatted, holding glum, tired vigil over the country below. An empty, dizzy feeling came each time he scanned the blue-hazed distance, watching for dust sign that might mean pursuit.

He avoided focusing his eyes on the rim. From there it was a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to a shadowy canyon. He tried not to see the yawning gulf of

space. It seemed to have some powerful, mysterious suction that sought his destruction. He squatted tautly, with heels dug into the weathered slabrock.

It was hard to ignore the rim, because the Butcherbird's powerful, well-coordinated body was poorly-matched by a wayward, undisciplined mind. But suddenly his attention was forced to it as a tiny, striped chipmunk frisked into his line of vision.

Chipmunks were numerous along the Rimrock, quick to discover and establish social terms with a camper. This one was obviously attracted by the morsels of crust that the man had spurned. He had flung them towards the rim but they had fallen and lodged on the crumbled slope between slabrock and the rim.

Out onto that hazardous edge, industriously searching for food, the chipmunk scampered, onto loose slide so easily dislodged. The Butcherbird jerked tensely erect. His flesh crawled.

Finding a fragment, the chipmunk flitted to a knob of rock and perched upright, holding the tidbit in its forepaws as it busily nibbled.

The rock was shallow imbedded in the slide, at the extreme edge, almost overhanging the rim. To the man's tortured gaze, each saucy flip of the chipmunk's tail threatened force enough to dislodge the rock and send it tumbling into the deep canyon.

The Butcherbird could not pry his eyes from it. He sat there, in hypnotized fascination, his vague and uncontrollable dread mounting to agonizing intensity. He took hold of the juniper, his fingers tightening like a vise. He breathed fast, as though from exertion. His pulse pounded, increasing the throbbing pain in his shoulder. His brutal face yellowed. Sweat oozed on his forehead.

He felt not the slightest anxiety about the chipmunk. He hated it for what it was doing to him. He hated himself for his helplessness. He breathed an ugly curse and despised himself the more because his voice was hoarse and shaky.

His forearm touched the hanging holster and that brought a ferocious glint to his eyes. Slowly he drew the gun with his left hand, thumbed back the hammer and sighted it across his knees. How easy it would be to blast the small creature out of existence! His finger curled around the trigger, then slackened. The echoes of a gunshot would travel far in the canyon. If a search was on, it would draw the posse to him!

HE SWORE again and put the gun back in its holster.

Once more he gripped the juniper, still staring glassily at his tormentor. His hold was heavy on the limb, a little above his head. It was brittle and suddenly snapped, coming loose in his clutch.

A wave of terror brought a yell from him and he flung the stick. It went wild, out into space. The chipmunk's small, bright eyes were on him. It stopped nibbling for an instant, but didn't even flinch as the missile whizzed past it.

The Butcherbird uttered a low moan. His face twitched and his insides twisted into a hard knot. A spasm of nausea swept over him. He reeled over and retched violently.

When that was over he sat up again, sleeving his dim, watery eyes. The chipmunk was gone. He gritted a profane hope that the accursed thing had fallen and perished.

When sufficient strength had seeped back into him, the Butcherbird stood up and cautiously made his way down through the gap to the spring. He drank deeply and returned with a waterbag which he poured into his hat for the thirsty horse.

The day dragged and he supped cheerlessly from his food hoard. Now he unsaddled the horse, not out of any mercy, but because the night air was sharp and he needed the saddle blanket for covering. He napped fitfully through the long night and when morning came his pain had subsided. He cold-snacked from another tin can, taking care to scatter no leavings where he had thrown yesterday's crusts.

But that precaution proved to be

futile. The Butcherbird, just up from the spring, dropped the filled waterbag. His bloodshot eyes bulged. His bull neck corded with fury. The chipmunk had nimbly reappeared, was frisking tantalizingly along that dangerous rim, searching for more crusts.

Cursing and raging, the man stooped, seized a stone and hurled it. Instantly he cried out and crumpled. He had used his right arm. The violent effort sent new agony into his wrenched shoulder.

The Butcherbird's breakfast turned to a leaden lump. Slumped down, he tried to cover his eyes with his clammy hands. But a force stronger than his will compelled him to peek through his fingers. Impudent and unafraid, the chipmunk nibbled and flipped its tail, there beside that awful void. Again the giddiness and nausea. The Butcherbird was sicker than on the day before.

The ordeal passed when the chipmunk finally darted off. By now the man realized that his situation was becoming unendurable. His reason was yielding to that insidious affliction so terribly aggravated by the chipmunk's antics. He had to destroy that chipmunk before it destroyed him. It was a greater menace than a raging lion.

Back to the juniper, he pondered darkly, ransacking his agitated mind for all that he had seen or heard or knew about chipmunks.

HE could contrive some sort of snare. But that would not do, because he was afraid to approach the slide to set it. He couldn't shoot it, was unable to throw anything straight enough with his one good arm and would have given much for some poison.

Finally, with a croak of sinful satisfaction, he hit on a plan. He would lure the friendly, trustful little creature within reach—just as he had Pop Parkins.

Yes, that was it. A chipmunk was easily tamed. It would take patience, of course, to gain its confidence. But time so devoted would only increase the pleasure of crushing the life out of it in his bare hands. The Butcherbird went to his food cache and made a careful selection of bait. The most tempting, he decided, were green peas.

So he opened a can with his knife, scattered a few peas sparingly around on the slabrock in such a way as to lure the little furry creature to the open can, which he set down carefully near his bedspot under the juniper.

Now to await its return. But return it did not, throughout all of that day. The chipmunk became an obsession. The Butcherbird thought of almost nothing else. It had become more important than anything else, a more serious menace than the law.

He slept a little better that night, out of exhaustion and weakness, but he wakened early, at the first faint glow of dawn. He didn't get up. He forced himself to lay there, very quietly. He had to wait for the sun's warmth. When the night chill was driven from the rocks, that was chipmunk time.

Full daylight, then slow sunrise were long in coming. The Butcherbird's muscles cramped but he dared not to shift his position. He moved only once, to reach out and move the can of peas a little closer to him. He gloated in anticipation of the feel of the soft, warm fur and the crunch of bones in his powerful squeeze.

He lay on his back under the horse blanket, his good left hand extended along the slabrock towards the can. At last his patience brought reward. He glimpsed a quick movement from a corner of an eye. Slowly, very craftily, he rolled his head around. He saw the chipmunk, busy on the bait trail. His heart thumped as it sampled a pea, evidently found it good, then scampered to the next.

The Butcherbird's fingers twitched with the craving to kill. The chipmunk came almost in reach now. It was shy, but yielding to its shyness. It sat up and eyed the man pertly. The Butcherbird had a smothery feeling of suspense. The thing frisked playfully and inched closer.

Then it made the swift venture, darting to the can. Its feet were on the

waiting, upturned palm. Then the Butcherbird clutched at the feel of them and sat up with a jerk.

His hand closed on nothing as the chipmunk streaked up his arm, onto his shoulder and leaped into the juniper.

With a roar of frustration, the man swept off the blanket and sprang up. His head banged solidly against a branch and it sent him staggering. One foot toppled the can. The other squashed down on the spilled and slippery contents. Still unsteady from the bump, the Butcherbird fell headlong.

He was perilously close to the edge, as he reeled to his feet. His brain whirled, robbing him of equilibrium, paralyzing his muscles. The suction of space took him like a chip in an eddy. He shrieked as he toppled again and sprawled down the slide. He made a frantic clutch at the rock where the chipmunk had perched and nagged him.

The rock came loose.

Headfirst he slid over the rim. A tumble of loose debris and a few bits of stale bread crust followed him in his screeching plunge to the canyon bottom.

Sheriff Cheney, back empty-handed from a manhunt, saw the stolen horse straggle back into town two days later, dragging a chafed and broken picket rope.

The dragged rope left sign that helped him to backtrack the horse to the robber's roost on the Rimrock. It was morning again when the sheriff got there.

Prepared for a shooting finish, he closed in on the camp. He saw the rumpled saddle blanket under the juniper and the opened food can on the slabrock, which told of a hasty leave-taking. Hasty indeed, he knew, as his eyes pounced on the hanging gunbelt and holstered six-shooter. Or was that just another mocking gesture of the elusive Butcherbird?

The fugitive's hideaway was deserted, that was sure. Except for a striped chipmunk that frolicked and feasted around peas spilled from the can.

The exasperated sheriff gave the can a lusty kick that sent it clattering over the rim. He was tempted to pitch his badge after it.

"Flew the coop again, dang him!" fumed the Sheriff. "That Shrike Satus, he's sure a slippery one!"

NEXT ISSUE'S GALA ROUNDUP OF

FIVE WESTERN NOVELS

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THE TRAIL BOSS — JOHNSTON McCULLEY
Larry Rolph fights odds to avenge a triple slaying on the old Chisholm Trail

GUNS OF VENGEANCE — JAMES W. ROUTH
Dan Winslow pits himself against Hawk Brewitt, scheming boss of Canyon City!

HELL FENCED OFF — LARRY A. HARRIS
Kid Curly, bank robber, finally rides the trail to honesty and vindication!

OUTLAWS ALL — W. D. HOFFMAN
The fugitive known as Dakota battles to even the score with three betrayers

SEED OF THE SIX-GUN — SYL MacDOWELL
Looksee Lundy, railroading man, takes a "look-see" at Superstition Valley!

THE PACK SADDLE

(Continued from page 9)

fire is another 60-minute proposition.

Starting with cold water in the pot figure on a good 20 minutes for coffee. Fried meats take about the same time, or a little less. In any event although it is good to know these general cooking times, a little leeway plus or minus can generally be allowed for. After all you are camping out, not catching a train.

That Dish-Washing Chore

One thing however should not be forgotten. That is to put a large pan or pot of water on the fire as soon as the meal is served—for washing the dishes afterwards. The water will be heating while you are eating. This saves a lot of post-meal cleanup time and makes washing the dishes not only faster but a lot easier as soon as everybody has finished.

As far as the pots and pans are concerned a good substitute for bought scouring powders is a handful of sand from the lake or stream edge. Just sand and cold water. Pulled-up bunches of grass with dirt clinging to the roots will do, if there is no sand available.

Sure, these are just details. But they are some of the things, big and little, that go toward making camp living the real pleasure that it can, and should, be.

—JOHN A. THOMPSON

OUR NEXT ISSUE

AS we sit here in an air-conditioned office high in the steel towers of New York, reading the stories and manuscripts about the Old West that cross our desk, we often wonder just *what* it was that started the great migration from the eastern seaboard to the West. Considering the time involved, the dangers that beset travelers, the uncertainty of what they would find after they got there, it's a wonder that the West was colonized at all. Gold is probably one of the magnets that drew man from his established fireside and sent him to the western mountains. For the lure of great wealth has always been an attraction even to those with deep-seated roots.

Again, we might say that the free land to be had under the homesteading laws started thousands across the prairies—farmers, in particular—to make new homes in the unknown West. To break the sod with wooden plow and eventually to make the United States one of the largest wheat-growing countries of the world. Immigrants from the Old World, too, constituted another important phase of the building of the West.

But what was the principal lure that drove many prosperous, settled families of the East to uproot their homes, cut all family ties, and move with thousands of others into the setting sun?

We think that the answer is—*adventure!*

The Other Side of the Hill

Within the heart of every man—and woman, too—there is undoubtedly that gnawing desire to find out what's on the other side of the hill. What is the land like? Are the sunsets something for an artist to paint? Are the winters a challenge of nature in which only the fit survive? Will the vast tracks of prairie produce food in life-giving abundance? And above all, will there be a new happiness—one that will finally bring a peace of contentment that comes when a challenge is met and Nature subjected to the will of man?

It is this thought of adventure, the challenge of the unknown, that we take into consideration when gathering together the action-packed stories that make up FIVE WESTERN NOVELS MAGAZINE. We try to combine the pounding of buffalo, the bawling of cattle, the crack of six-guns, the war whoops of raiding Indians, the charge of cavalry at a far-flung outpost, the battle between rancher and nester, the dry creak of wheels of covered wagons crossing the plains—try to combine these, and more, into the many thrilling novels of the West that make up FIVE WESTERN NOVELS MAGAZINE. And by doing so we think we are presenting for your reading pleasure the best that the West has to offer!

Trail to Shantyville

Now, let's see what the next issue will bring to you.

In THE TRAIL BOSS, the author—Johnston McCulley—tells a story of a man who followed a trail of vengeance and found its end in tough Shantyville, a mushroom town that, like some evil growth, had sprung up along the trail from Texas to Kansas.

Larry Ralph learned for certain what he had long suspected—that an evil trio headed by hulking Ed Hannock had murdered his best friend along the Chisholm Trail. And Larry was determined to kill the three murderers, remove them from the world of the living with as much ruthlessness as he would have slain a vicious rattlesnake. But when he had them practically where he wanted them, something unforeseen occurred that changed Larry's plans completely—but not for long. It started with the fleecing at cards of a young lad whose father was bringing a herd along the trail, and with the framing of the boy for murdering his father's ramrod. Larry was witness to this, saw that Hannock had some deep reason behind his evil actions. Even this might not have stopped Larry's plans for immediate vengeance, but what did stop him momentarily was the appearance in Shantyville of beautiful Dorcas Shelling, sister of the lad Hannock had jobbed.

It was due to Dorcas that Larry took over the dead ramrod's job, aided the Shelling family. But he didn't forget his original mission. Learn in THE TRAIL BOSS how Larry finally gained his vengeance against Hannock and his two crooked pals—vengeance in a manner so strange as to border on the uncanny!

A Dangerous Mission

GUNS OF VENGEANCE, by James W. Routh, is a novel of Dan Winslow, who had ridden long and far to get revenge against a man who had murdered his father and abducted his sister. Hawk Brewitt had cleverly blotted his trail many times, but somehow Winslow had always found it again. Now, as he looked down on the sun-blistered town of Canyon City, huddled between low sand hills at the rim of the desert, Winslow knew as positively as if he had seen Hawk Brewitt with his own eyes that the trail ended here.

This certainly was partly due to a girl—a girl he'd saved from the forced kisses of tough Mel Ide—a girl so beautiful that when Dan first met her glance, the sweet beauty of her struck him like a tidal wave, left him literally gasping. That the girl was affected in the same manner, was obvious. It was love at first sight. But before it could be realized in marriage, Winslow had a grim job to perform. *(Turn page)*

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The girl had told him that Hawk Brewitt, along with his henchman Mel Ide, had the county in his grasp, was reaching for more power, and would probably get it if he wasn't stopped. Well, that fitted in with Winslow's plans, for his own revenge could be coupled with the attempt of local ranchers to bring Brewitt to his knees and end his domination. Much blood would be shed, the air thickened with gunsmoke, before Winslow finished what he set out to do. But it bought him the undying love of beautiful Kate Dumont.

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Guns had appeared in the hands of the two men. The banker was right when he croaked out "Holdup!" and recognized Kid Curley and Butch Farley as the stickups. . . .

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was no doubt. But he drew the line at kidnaping a girl who happened to be in the bank at the time of the robbery. Butch Farley had no such scruples, however. Linda Gray, to him, was a hostage—maybe more. And it was the "more" that started the Kid to thinking later that night, when they made an outlaw's camp in the desert. The Kid wasn't all bad.

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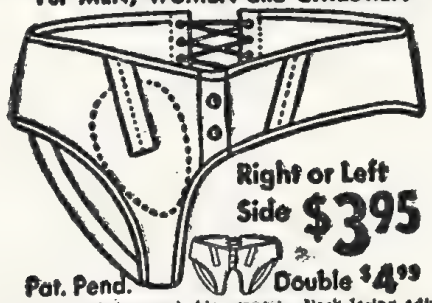

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Dakota started, gulping his food. "I have taken a liking to you, Black Eyes!" he declared. "Thanks for the feed."

He studied her. Only a sheep girl, about seventeen, but already growing beautiful. Not a Mexican was Billita, but pink-cheeked Spanish, her blood from the Basques of the Pyrenees, like most of the sheep folk hereabouts.

Hoofbeats interrupted Dakota's musings, as the girl pointed out the newcomer to be the sheriff. Dakota stood stone still. Hunted and hunter—that was his role here tonight. He'd come to even the play with the Knifer, Abilene Bill and Deadwood, old pals who had betrayed him. And now the sheriff had come. . . .

Dakota was known as Jennison in the old days, when his pals had betrayed him and made him the fall guy for a stage robbery; charged, untruthfully, with murdering a Wyoming senator, lone passenger in that coach of death. Four years now Dakota had waited, looked, searched, in a hundred camps in a hundred counties from Wyoming to Texas. And now he knew he was nearing the end of his quest. But would the girl betray him to the sheriff?

Billita didn't—perhaps for a reason Dakota didn't at first understand. But when in repayment Dakota helped her family fight off range crooks, he finally realized

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(Turn page)

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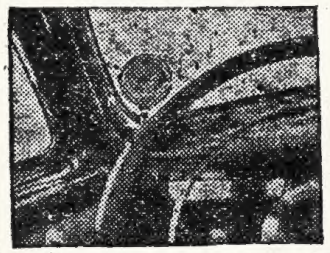

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statement Looksee was certain of, for he'd no sooner entered the valley than he had to protect an old nester from being beaten to death by an armed band, seemingly for no obvious reason. But when the nester was killed in cold blood while recovering from his beating, Looksee became aware that there might be something human behind the curse on Superstition Valley. And he had a suspicion that a two-legged human varmint posing as a land agent, named Yucca Yates, might be the one who was putting on the curse.

Yates was a shrewd operator, and he nearly got away with his gigantic plot to control the valley and thus cash in over the sodbusters who were trying to hold on to their land.

In a terrific climax, Looksee manages to outwit Yates and save for the sodbusters that which belonged to them—in SEED OF THE SIX-GUN, next issue!

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—THE EDITOR

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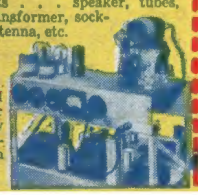

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